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HONEYMOON IN SHANGHAI



THE WORKS OF MAURICE DEKOBRA

FICTION

THE MADONNA OF THE SLEEPING CARS
WINGS OF DESIRE
THE PHANTOM GONDOLA
FLAMES OF VELVET
SERENADE TO THE HANGMAN
VENUS ON WHEELS
THE SPHINX HAS SPOKEN
(FRIENDS AND LOVERS)
PHRYNÉ, OR LOVE AS A FINE ART
MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE
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STARS AND STRIPS
DEATH REQUESTS THE PLEASURE
EMIGRANTS DE LUXE
THE ROMANCE OF A COWARD
THE MADONNA IN HOLLYWOOD
HONEYMOON IN SHANGHAI

NON-FICTION

CONFUCIUS IN A TAILCOAT
A FRENCHMAN IN JAPAN
TWENTY-ONE NIGHTS IN PARIS



HONEYMOON IN SHANGHAI

by
MAURICE DEKOBRA

Translated from the French
by
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I

ON the third floor of the Hotel Imperial, two women sat watching the rain fall past the windows of their room.

They were mother and daughter—Magali Hobson and her little Claudette. For in Magali's eyes Claudette, although eighteen, was still her "little" Claudette.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. Having nothing better to do, they sat watching the downpour. Suddenly Claudette gave a deep sigh.

"Mother, will it go on much longer?"

"Child, ask Confucius. The wisest of the wise knows all, even the mind of the meteorologist who predicted in the *China Herald* that it would be fine to-day."

The rain was falling on Shanghai, that malignant city where death laughs yellow; the city which twangs on a Chinese lute its lament of corruption, where the Tao-Tai lounge for ever on holiday, where generals have no armies, embezzlers run loose, shipowners have no ships, and opium-takers walk the streets with dark-ringed eyes.

The rain was falling on Shanghai, on the boy teasing the laughing sing-song girl, on the slinking half-caste, on the oily pimp, and on the Russian "taxi girl" selling her body to save her soul.

It was raining on Shanghai, that grinning mask laid by white hands over the ageless face of the Son of Heaven.

A February torrent, hard, continuous, implacable, which stung the houses in its rage. The clouds gathered in the firmament, mingling all the various shades of grey like a wash drawing in Chinese ink. The muddy water of the Wang Poo was whipped into goose-flesh under the successive blasts of wind. Japanese warships shone in mid-stream. Everything shone; the wharves of the Bund*; the dripping façade of the Customs House; the tiles on the roofs, the oilskins of the Sikh policemen at the corner of the Nanking Road; the shorn heads of the rickshaw carriers who shivered in their drenched linens, glued like snails along the walls.

Passers-by hurried along under umbrellas. Motor-cars raced to and fro, splashing water on all sides. The pointed roofs which bristled everywhere over the Chinese town seemed to shoot out threatening fingers against the pitiless downpour.

*The Embankment along the Wang Poo River.

One would have said that Asia was weeping endless tears over this hybrid city, built by Mercury, God of thieves, on the threshold of the former Empire of the East.

"Oh, how this endless rain gets on my nerves," cried Claudette.

"Quiet, child. Don't be so restless."

Claudette burst out laughing.

"That from you, Mother! That's funny!"

"Well, sweet child, sometimes one realizes that walls are harder than human heads. Don't you understand that I'm just as agitated as you are? I'm like a horse champing at the bit! For the last three days I've been in this state."

"Three days and a half."

"Our fate's to be decided this week—that's enough to put one's nerves on edge. If I were a child I should be biting my nails."

"Dearest Mother, please don't talk *quite* so loud!"

"I'm being as quiet as I can."

"You admit yourself that it won't help if we start tearing our hair."

"Fancy leaving us in this uncertainty. To hell with your Uncle Larry."

Magali flung out this mild expletive in the charming Marseilles accent which betrayed her origin. The rich inflexions of her voice evoked a memory of the old harbour town, recalling sunshine, "aioli" and "rascasses," fish shops along the Quai des Belges, and flower-shops in the Allées de Meilhan, the fishermen of the Roucas Blanc and the peasants crossing backwards and forwards on the ferry-boat.

Claudette sighed again and took up the tapestry work which she had begun on the steamer when they were travelling from Saigon to Shanghai. Magali, seated by the window, turned over the leaves of an old magazine. She was not reading it—her thoughts were elsewhere. She gazed with unseeing eyes at the pictures on the wall, two coloured lithographs of Watteau's "Embarquement pour Cythère," and David's "Sacre de Napoleon Ier," not caring to know what extraordinary accident had brought these two pictures to this eight-storied hotel in the middle of the French concession.

There was a knock on the door. The white-clad Chinese boy entered with an apologetic and radiant smile, as though the town itself were radiant. Knowing that Mrs. Hobson was French in spite of her name, he addressed her in a mixture of pidgin English and slang, a habit he had picked up from constant dealings with colonials of the army of occupation.

"Pardon, Missi Obson—sorry—forgot change towels. Can do!"

He went into the bathroom. A few minutes later Magali called

to him in the authoritative voice of a woman who has lived twenty years of colonial life, and knows how to treat native servants.

"Boy, come here, hurry."

The boy reappeared, smiling as before, with the dirty towels under his arm.

"Yes, Missi."

"Boy, be kind and ask the porter if a letter or telegram has arrived for Mrs. Hobson—savey—Mrs. Hobson."

"Yes, Missi Obson, at once. Can do!"

The boy disappeared.

Claudette sighed again.

"Mother, isn't this like being in a dentist's waiting-room?"

"Well, what's to be done? Is it my fault that there's no news?"

"Three days now. For three days we've hardly dared go out and visit Shanghai, in case we might hear at any moment from Uncle Larry."

"Why so peevish, child? I'm no happier than you are. It's certainly a pity that Uncle Larry chose to disappear the moment our boat arrived."

"You don't think he did it on purpose?"

"Are you mad?—You certainly have the oddest ideas."

"Perhaps Uncle Larry wasn't very anxious to meet us."

"Don't talk nonsense, Claudette. His letter addressed to Saigon was clear enough."

"Perhaps it was only a piece of civility after Papa's death. Being a well-brought-up uncle, he might have thought it his duty to condole with us, to ask us out and so on. . . . We ought not to have taken him seriously."

Magali flung her magazine on the sofa. She burst out:

"That's too much! You might as well accuse me outright of being piqued."

"Oh do keep calm, Mother. There's no reason to fly into a rage."

"Not to take Uncle Larry's invitation seriously! You don't know what you're saying."

Magali had got to her feet; she was at the end of her tether. Three days of waiting in this hotel in this town where she knew no one, in this strange country of China lying under the yoke of the Japanese invasion, these three days of indecision were beginning to tell on her. Her daughter's doubts about the wisdom of their journey began to work upon her own mind.

Magali's sudden outburst of rage betrayed her inner torment. She came from the South, and the hot blood of Provence flowed in her veins. A handsome brunette of forty-two, she had all the vigour, animation and natural impetuosity of her race. She knew

no half-measures. She could not ponder or deliberate or be prudent. She was a woman who charged against life as a bull charges at the toreador's *muleta*—who lived for the moment and faced up squarely to the outside world.

When she had left Marseilles to live with her parents in French Indo-China, Magali had brought the whole atmosphere of Provence in her Louis XV heels. Her father, Nestor Mérillac, native of Arles, had been appointed Inspector-General of Customs at Saïgon. He and his wife Anais—also a Southerner, born in Nîmes—had settled in Indo-China, bringing with them their respectable middle-class ways of life, their furniture, their habits, their patent medicines and their Magali. Magali was then eighteen, and one of the prettiest girls in Cochinchina. Old rubber planters who were just beginning to make fortunes from their haveas trees, and who sat drinking cocktails on the terrace of the Continental Hotel, would lean and whisper to each other as Magali walked past along the Rue Catinat. "Look at Mérillac's daughter," they would say. "Nice little filly, what? Nineteen years old, perfect teeth, and breasts like an Empress. She's afraid of nothing. She'd look at a man and undress him at ten foot distance—she'd bring a blush to the cheek of a regimental sergeant-major—I wouldn't mind betting that that child will marry one of the big-wigs of the Residence here or at Hué or Hanoi . . . And with a name like Magali, a name that conjures up the scent of rosemary and of olive trees in bloom! God, she's got the world at her feet!"

Indeed, Magali's beauty had already caused havoc in Saïgon. The Inspector-General of Customs might well be proud of his lovely daughter. But the prophecies of the rubber planters regarding Magali's marriage proved false. The Great Book of Fate decreed that in 1918 she should fall in love with a thirty-year-old American, managing director of a branch of the Asiatic Oil Company, a man with a hearty laugh and the shoulders of a Rugby player. Benjamin Hobson—Ben to his friends—was one of the most sought-after young men from Saïgon to Dalat. All the girls had designs on this handsome young "petrol-king," with his high spirits and his pleasant smile.

One day, Magali swept like a whirlwind into her parents' villa, brushed aside the Annamite servant who was laying the table for dinner, and announced in triumphant tones:

"Mother! I've won the prize! I've got Ben. He asked me to marry him this afternoon at tennis, between the second and third set."

That evening, the Inspector of Customs and his wife took counsel together and weighed carefully the prospect of young

Hobson as a son-in-law, while Magali, bursting with impatience, swept aside all objections.

"He's a magnificent catch, Papa . . . ! In a few years he'll be managing director of the Far East Company. Do you realize—he'll have thirty thousand dollars a year? Your pittance as a poor French official will be a trifle compared with the salary of your son-in-law. And I've made careful enquiries. He belongs to one of the best families in Dayton, Ohio. His father's worth a million dollars. His brother Larry, a retired naval officer, is director of a South-Sea steamship company . . . And Ben is really adorable—all my friends are mad about him. They already want to take my American from me . . . Oh yes, I've watched those little mixxes with their arch smiles, and their sly little vamping ways! Ben this and Ben that . . . ! Little hussies! They'd have wafted him away before I'd even had time to drink a lemon squash in the club! Do you know, Mother, that Micheline, the daughter of that chemist, the Major, had already hatched a plot to kidnap him on the sly? Even Ben was shocked at her brazenness. However, that's all over; my rivals can now draw in their claws."

Magali's father and mother had remained silent before this outburst. At last the Inspector-General of Customs ventured a gentle question:

"Tell me, Magali . . . Do you want to marry Mr. Hobson in order to spite your dear friends, or because you love him?"

"Father, I adore him. Ben's an American; that's enough for me . . . Oh, I've thought it all out at great length."

Madame Mérillac shook her head; she doubted whether her daughter had thought it out very hard. Magali was not that kind. "Magali," she used to say, "is a madcap . . . she makes up her mind before you've time to blow out a match."

Magali leaned urgently towards her mother in an effort to convince her, because she felt sure a mother would understand a daughter's feelings. Words poured excitedly from her pretty full mouth; happiness shone from her large dark eyes; 30,000 volts of *joie de vivre*, of dynamic energy ready to explode and of happy anticipations for the future.

"Yes, Mother, I've been thinking it over for the last three months. Please don't laugh. I adore my Benny; husbands like that are not to be found every day in this forlorn country; all my colonial flirtations, pooh! Boring, fussy little office clerks, canting humbugs, amorous skinflints, shrunk old bourgeois who offer me the blissful prospect of watching them nurse their livers in retirement in Vichy . . . No, thank you. Old France is going to marry young America. Ben's mad about me, and I'm mad about him. His heart is young and fresh. He hasn't spent his life dragging

about among all the filthy brothels from Pnom Penh to Haiphong. In six weeks I shall be Mrs. Benjamin Hobson, an American citizen. I shall have my cheque-book and my dollars safely in the bank. Ben's wedding present, Mother, is to be a settlement. You don't know what a settlement is, do you? It's a sum of money which your future husband gives you. Ben doesn't care a damn about my dowry. He actually laughed when I told him that Papa was giving me one hundred and fifty thousand francs. He said in his funny accent, 'Darling, your father could threaten me with a hundred and fifty thousand socks in the eye, and I wouldn't touch a cent of your dowry. A dowry! As though your dear father was slipping me a few farthings under the counter for the privilege of sharing your bed. Honey, when I marry you, I shall place ten thousand dollars in your name in the Asiatic Trust Company. The money will be yours, to buy yourself safety-pins, jade necklaces or what you will.' There, Mother, that's what Ben said to me. Compare that young man with the greedy louts in my little circle of friends... young swaggerers whose mouths water at the very idea of squandering my dowry to keep half-caste women, laughing at me behind my back. No thank you! My mind's made up."

Magali had married Ben. A year later, Claudette was born. The Hobson *ménage* followed the usual course of such marriages. First came a period of excitement, then disillusionment, and finally resignation. For three years Magali and Ben were envied by all and sundry. People were jealous of their happiness—remarked on their comfortable life, admired their lovely child. Magali loved her husband and Ben his wife. He was proud to be the husband of the prettiest French woman in Indo-China. Provence and the Middle West hit it off very well; the "Hamburger" and the "tomate farcie" understood each other; the blue fumes of "Chesterfield" and "caporal doux" blended miraculously. Ben taught Magali English, and she spoke it with a strong accent which added to the charm of her grammatical errors. They played tennis together. They hunted together in the high mountains of the Laos. Governors, first secretaries, military officials were glad to entertain the lovely Mrs. Hobson, their new compatriot who chewed gum like a Ziegfeld folly girl, renounced *l'Illustration* in favour of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and talked of Ohio and Illinois as though she had been born there.

Claudette grew up and became a charming child. The first flame of marital rapture grew fainter, as in a grand scene of pantomime, when the spotlights are extinguished one by one, leaving the stage in darkness. The mills of Time ground slowly, crushing the first transports of joy, of bounding optimism. Petty annoyances began to dim the sunshine of their happiness.

Small clouds appeared on the horizon. Ben, for instance, started smoking large cigars which made his breath no sweeter when Magali offered him her kisses. He was less careful about his appearance than in the first days of their marriage. He ceased to notice his wife's new hats and dresses. The lover grew less ardent—Romeo was becoming Barbarouche.

A dirty collar—an old sock has broken up as many homes as rats and the bubonic plague. Playing together like two squirrels in a cage had at first seemed to Magali the acme of joy; gradually it became monotonous. Moreover, there had been one or two instances of unfaithfulness. She hid these from her parents, but suffered nevertheless. Ben was a good husband, but his high spirits were not quite so infectious as at first. His cultural interests were without depth, and he was not really concerned in much beyond the Asiatic petrol market.

Magali had also discovered that the Hobsons of Dayton were not rich, and that Pa Hobson's profession was the honourable but humble one of overseer in an automobile factory. Magali realized that the legend of America as the land of millionaires, gangsters and film stars was far from true; that poverty was to be found everywhere in the forty-eight states of the Union, and that for three generations that country had been the victim of a small crowd of theatrical managers, novelists and scenario writers who had distorted its true appearance for the benefit of older continents.

Ben's chances of becoming managing director of the Asiatic Oil Company in the Far East diminished with the years. The Administrative Board found him a good employee, and nothing more. The promised salary of 30,000 dollars faded like a mirage. Her illusions shipwrecked, there remained no consolation for Magali but the aforesaid Uncle Larry. Ben's eldest brother was very rich; he had amassed a fortune in Shanghai, and was one of the leading figures in the international concession. Ben spoke always with pride of his brother Larry.

"Honey, one day you'll meet Larry," he used to tell his wife. "*There's* a fellow who's made a success. He retired from active service in the navy and went into the armament business. His syndicate owns a flotilla of fifty-five thousand tons. When we get three months' leave, we'll make a grand tour of Shanghai. Larry will do us proud, you'll see."

Unfortunately this three months' leave never came, and in any case the Hobson finances could not extend to these long journeys. Uncle Larry remained a remote, inaccessible figure like a Thibetan lama, lording it with the millionaires amid the high and mighty ones of Shanghai. Twice a year, on his birthday and at Christmas,

Larry communicated with his brother Ben in a fifty-word telegram of affection and good cheer, ending always with "a thousand kisses" for Magali and Claudette.



Claudette was eighteen when her father suddenly died. It was a cruel blow for Magali, who had ceased to hope for a brilliant future and was quite happy in the affection of her dear Ben. A sudden attack of pneumonia removed in a single night her companion of twenty years. She grieved for him most sincerely. It was not Ben's fault that he had shown no genius for petrol, nor that he had failed as a go-getter in the business work. She had enjoyed with him a period of quiet happiness, built up piece by piece like the chassis of a car, a calm affection with no sudden dramatic pauses, an affection tainted a little perhaps by the stale smell of cigars and of half-empty whisky glasses. But what did that matter?

Her charming Ben had given her a magnificent present; their daughter. A beauty, a pearl. A Claudette whom all the mothers in the colony envied. A daughter who combined the poetry of Provence with the realism of Ohio—her mother's temperament with her father's cheerful optimism—the idealism of a race which used troubadours to defend the fortress of Languedoc with the materialism of a line of pioneers who by sheer force had won the right to live in a new continent.

Magali had indeed cause to be proud of her "little" Claudette. Not only had nature cleverly combined the dark beauty of her mother with the athletic suppleness of her father, but the Franco-American cross-breeding had done wonders. Claudette was tall and beautifully proportioned; with her perfect silhouette she could have won the first prize at a Miami beauty show. Her breasts were superb, her hips well-rounded, her thighs a perfect contour. The startling dark green of her eyes added a further attraction to this lovely brunette with the wavy silken hair.

Her voice was soft and low, and had none of her mother's Southern accent. She spoke English and French equally well, because her father had insisted that at the age of five she should read Conan Doyle, the only author who had ever been able to tear Ben away from his everlasting petrol.

Claudette had taken her degree at Saigon. She had studied at the School of Oriental Languages and had also a rudimentary knowledge of the Mandarin tongue. She was a trained nurse and could minister to the sick and wounded. At eighteen she was

astoundingly mature in mind—a strange mixture of precocious experience and youthful idealism for beautiful things and noble causes. Dowagers over their tea-cups would whisper, "My dear, the man who wins that girl's affections will have won the first prize in a lottery."

It was no wonder that Magali loved, admired and spoiled her daughter. When Claudette reached the age of eighteen Magali's chief concern was to see Claudette established in a life of comfort and luxury.

There was but one thing which caused Magali anxiety; the thought of her daughter's future. Magali, herself so highly-strung and imaginative, so obsessed with high ambitions and fanciful dreams, could not understand her daughter's shyness. Although Claudette did not feign innocence and simplicity whilst the young women of her generation cultivated airs of ruthless audacity and carefree impudence, she was genuinely reserved, and at the same time without ambition.

Those who saw a young girl of such beauty, ripe ready for love and conquests, were astonished to find that pretentiousness and pride were quite foreign to her. She was entirely indifferent to admiration and success of mundane character.

In fact, Claudette had the mentality of a plain woman, bourgeoisie and nondescript. This superb creature whom the Hollywood talent scouts would have willingly lassoed, did not, like her mother, crave riches or rare jewels, or rose-coloured palaces, or showy publicity, or for morganatic marriage with some exiled sovereign.

Claudette, with her pure profile, her irresistible smile, her quiet grace, her refinement, could be quite happy in the kitchen, mending her underwear or simply sitting in front of the fire listening to good music and quietly dreaming of the day when she would meet the man of her choice. He would be neither a duke, nor a genius. She longed most for children and he would fulfil her most cherished dream.

The Chinese boy reappeared, still smiling, his mouth open like a squeezed lemon.

"Missi Obson, there is no message."

"Thank you, boy; please bring us a pot of tea for two at five o'clock."

"Yes, Missi, pot of tea for two—can do." He disappeared. Magali looked at her daughter.

"No news; it's incredible!"

Claudette dared not lose control for fear of putting her mother in a bad temper. She answered soothingly.

"Uncle Larry'll let us know when he returns."

"It's bewildering! He knew that we were arriving on the 'Felix Roussel' and now he allows us to wait like this. Not a single sign of life apart from that radio message on board excusing himself for not meeting us at the customs."

"Listen, Mother, I've got an idea. Why shouldn't we go and call at his house? It would be so simple. You know his address; 1245 Amoy Road."

"Really, Claudette!" Her mother seemed so upset at this idea that Claudette repeated her suggestion.

"I hope you're not serious when you talk like that! Can you see us, his sister-in-law and his niece, calling like two tarts at the door of his expensive villa! Just think what the servants would say! Have you lost all sense of dignity? Don't forget we're in the country of '*Face*'!"

Claudette shook her head, smiling.

"Yes, Mother, I know; '*Face*'! Always this business of '*Face*.' If it weren't for that we should probably know why he was away, and when he was coming back."

"It can't be helped. I'd rather sit waiting in this hotel than appear undignified before his servants."

Claudette put her needlework down on the table—stretched herself like a cat.

"Yes, Mother, I see what you mean; we're in China and so we must submit to this custom of '*Face*.' But why didn't you try the telephone? I mean discreetly—without giving your name."

"Dearest, Uncle Larry is not in the telephone book, and the exchange refused to give me his number."

"Oh, these classy gentlemen! Ordinary common mortals can't even telephone to Uncle Larry. I suppose I shall have to bow to him as they do at Buckingham Palace."

"It's really no joke child. You'll see. After all, you heard your poor father telling us over and over again how important this Shanghai millionaire was. He seems able even to control the weather. But I've got an idea that our patience will be rewarded."

At five o'clock, as it was getting dark, the neon lights sent a rosy glow over the sky. The rain had stopped. The "boy" appeared with the tea. He pointed to the window, his smile broader than ever.

"Missi Obson—the downpour has stopped—can do walk in the Avenue Edward VII."

Magali and Claudette nibbled their biscuits and drank the contents of the blue china teapot. They then decided to follow the boy's advice. They strolled for an hour up and down the avenues of the Concessions, refusing the offers of the coolies

who splashed about in the puddles with their rickshaws. They then returned to the hotel, ate some dinner and spent an hour in a small neighbouring cinema. At eleven they went to bed in their double bedroom, feeling that they had done the best for themselves in this difficult situation, that it was wisest to wait patiently for Uncle Larry's return. After all, he had promised in his letter that he would let them stay with him for as long as they wanted. And Magali and Claudette had agreed that it would not make much difference to the life of a Shanghai millionaire with a host of retainers whether they stayed three months more or less.

Mother and daughter were undressed. Claudette had put on a pink *crêpe de Chine* nightdress. Magali, having lived so long in the colonies, had acquired the habit of sleeping only in the top part of her pyjamas. She walked up and down the room, arranging the various knick-knacks, uncorking the bottles of scent and tidying her underclothes. Finally she sat down in front of the mirror to arrange her hair which had grown rather long. There was no shyness between mother and daughter. Claudette was lying on her bed, glancing abstractedly through the pages of a travel book. Magali dropped the lid of one of her pots of beauty cream, and leant down to pick it up. Claudette burst out laughing behind her book, and hummed Miss Helyett's tune, "Oh, what a lovely point of view, Mother dear."

Magali looked round, astonished.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm laughing at your get-up, Mother. You look so funny trundling about bare-legged with your behind sticking out."

"Well at least it's very practical, my get-up."

"I realize now why people are always saying to me that you look young enough to be my sister."

"Oh child, really."

"Yes, darling, you are extraordinary, you know. No lines on your face and a marvellous figure. You really don't look more than thirty."

Magali gazed smugly at herself in the cupboard mirror.

"You really think so, Claudette?"

"Look for yourself."

Magali undid her pyjama jacket to examine her breasts.

"Come here, Claudette," she said.

"Why?"

"Let's compare ourselves—you know, as people did in the days of Fragonard and Boucher."

Claudette sprang from her bed. She liked playing about with her mother as with a girl of her own age. Her mother was her

greatest friend, the woman she trusted above all others, to whom she could confide her little unhappinesses and her hopes for the future.

Magali gave her a side-long glance, and said gleefully, "Come on, child. Let's have a look at you."

Claudette obeyed. Her gleaming white body, young and slender, made the most entrancing picture. The two women stood side by side like two soldiers at attention. Magali's breasts were harder than her daughter's, but they were still superb; her skin was darker than Claudette's and the nipples shaded with brown.

Magali shook her head and looked sulky.

"Oh dear, the old dame looks a bit the worse for wear, I fear."

Claudette protested vehemently.

"Mother, you're crazy. Look, you're as firm as I am. Why your figure's like a challenge to the whole world."

"Oh, darling, how cold your hands are!"

"Mother, I swear you are astounding. Look at your tummy! It's as flat as mine . . . And your thighs? Like the Venus of Cnidos! I'm going to tell you something, Mother; if I were a young man I should worship you. I'd give you all the treasures of Golconda, all the Queen of Sheba's diamonds, Cleopatra's pendants and the Koh-i-noor into the bargain!"

Magali was deliciously excited by her daughter's compliments. She spun round in front of the glass, swinging from side to side, trying to convince herself that Claudette was not exaggerating.

"Darling," she said suddenly, "would you believe it if I told you that your poor father didn't appreciate my figure? From living so long in the East, he had acquired the Chinese taste for the small flat-chested type."

"Mother, is it true that men are very intrigued by that part of our bodies?"

"Yes, indeed. Most men get excited when they see a nice *décolleté*. Have you noticed, when you're in evening dress, how men come up to you and say 'What a lovely necklace!' Don't imagine that the lewd creatures are admiring your jewels. It's only an excuse to get closer to you and to examine the charming contours of your '*avantages*,' as our grandmothers used to call them in those far-off days of President Carnot. Men haven't changed, dearest, since the time of good King Henri IV, who always ended his letters to Gabriel d'Estrées with the words, 'A kiss to your two little apples.'"

"Well said, Mama! And is the quality of one's skin equally important?"

"Of the utmost importance. A rather bawdy old *curé* in Provence used often to recite to our Uncle Anselme—

'Skin of satine
Lecher's damnation
Skin of shagreen
Hussar's desperation.'

He was quite right. One doesn't wrap up a ripe peach in brown paper. Your body and a man's lust are divided by a kind of frontier or wall, which is called flesh. If you have dull, lustreless flesh, then a man loses desire for you. If, on the other hand, you are lucky enough to have a silky, soft skin, which melts at the touch, a skin which has the moist freshness of an early morning rose-petal, then you have every chance of triumphing."

"Mother, you talk like a book."

"Child, remember that your mother has had twenty years' experience of men whose only interest is sex. Nine out of ten of them are satyrs disguised as sextons. The most honest are those who are not ashamed to show their cloven hooves."

"Oh, I can manage *them* all right!"

"I wonder."

"I know it."

"You've got the supreme confidence of youth. To me men's characters are as clear as fish in an aquarium. The red fish represent their evil desires."

"Mother, I'm not worrying about you. You know your way about. And you're still beautiful enough to have men running round you, so there are many happy days ahead of you."

"You spoil me, darling child."

Magali was unconsciously swallowing Claudette's compliments. In spite of her acquired cynicism, in spite of the knowledge she had gained through rubbing up against every sort of man, yet that evening she was happy once more, admiring herself in the glass, stroking her hips to control their beauty, kneading her flesh to prove its firmness. On the whole, she thought, Provence is not badly represented in China by this academy of beauty. She remembered what the doctor on the "Felix Roussel" had said to her, one evening in the smoking-room:

"Madame Hobson, I don't know if your exquisite daughter will break many hearts in Shanghai, but I wouldn't mind betting that her mother will polish off many of her daughter's failures." And after that night, the jolly doctor had christened Magali and Claudette "Scylla and Charybdis." "Clearly," said he, cramming his pipe, "those cunning rogues who think they've avoided the starboard siren, will fall into the toils of the siren to port."

Magali returned Claudette's compliments; she took her by the waist, and cheek to cheek, the two women stood together half-naked, smiling at their reflections in the glass. Magali said, "If *any one* should be spoilt, it's you, my love. With your cheeky little face and your sex appeal, you ought in three months to be Queen of Shanghai."

"Let's call it Viscountess of Wang Poo and say no more about it. Mother, your imagination always races away at a thousand miles an hour. You're fantastic. You ought to have been a novelist. Those poor literary hacks should come to you, instead of racking their empty heads for some idiotic subject or other to write about. What would they give you for your imagination, your amazing dreams, your power to build castles in the air! Sweet Mama, you'll always mistake the meanest crossing-sweeper for a Royal Highness coming to fetch your Claudette in his Rolls. Unfortunately the Rolls will always be the municipal watering-cart."

"Claudette, you're too much of a realist."

"Maman, stuffing one's head with dreams is just auto-intoxication."

"Child, imagination can move mountains!"

"Yes, and then you wake up and find yourself at the bottom of a precipice!"

Magali put her hand round her daughter's waist.

"Don't you think we are a bit silly philosophizing half-naked in front of this looking-glass. Let's go to bed, child. It's getting chilly."

They went to bed, their beds separated only by a little table and a pink lamp. The street noises had subsided, and only a klaxon horn was heard at intervals. A Japanese plane buzzed overhead. They turned on the wireless. There was an American commentator in Manila talking about the situation in Europe, the threat to Czecho-Slovakia, and the increasing anxiety felt in the Embassies of that far-off continent. Claudette switched off.

"Oh, he's just a bore. There's no hurry about the war. Let's talk about our own little worries, since we've got nothing better to do until Uncle Larry arrives."

"My God, what I'm going to say to that Uncle Larry of yours when I see him!"

"Mother, I've always been astonished at a certain contradiction in your nature. One side of you is bursting with imagination and enthusiasm, and the other side, the experienced side, gives you the power of sound judgment, and seems to hold your imagination in check."

"What are you driving at, child?"

"What I mean is: your life must be a constant effort to balance on a tight-rope, with an accelerator in one hand, and a hand-brake in the other."

"Darling, a qualified psychologist could describe in technical language this permanent conflict in my mind. But you and I are no great scholars, so we have to rely on ordinary language to explain ourselves to ourselves. It's just as good a way. You talk about my conflict—it's purely this: I'm a calculating and an excitable person at one and the same time. The Provençal blood in me makes me fly off at a tangent, while my experience says to me, 'Magali, look out; don't make a fool of yourself.' You see, child? So for heaven's sake never model yourself on me. Once I'm caught up in a gamble, I bungle everything; I think neither of cause nor effect, nor logic, nor reason, nor common sense. I know myself pretty well, you see! And now that we're indulging in a little quiet self-analysis, allow me to put you too on the dissecting board. Claudette, will you never, never conquer this reserve which seems to possess you, this underrating of your true worth, of your beauty, this shyness which seems to have dominated you from the moment you first reached marriageable age?"

Claudette burst out laughing. She turned over on her side, thumped the pillow for her elbow to rest on, and said, looking at her mother:

"There! now I'm all set to listen to the midnight sermon."

Magali sat up in bed. She had a serious look on her face. "It's true, child. I don't understand you. Perhaps I do err on the side of over-excitement and high-flown ideas; but you, child, you put me in despair sometimes with your modesty, your lack of ambition, your indifference to every joy which life can offer; you stagger me by your calmness and renunciation. Lack of ambition—that's the thing above all which is astonishing about you. You're more than merely pretty—you're beautiful. Men look at you with their mouths agape! Any other girl in your place would throw herself madly at the prospect of success, glory, triumphs of every kind which are yours for the asking. And there you sit, calmly and modestly, and no insane longings ever obsess you, or upset the perfect balance of your mind. Claudette, sometimes I wonder whether you really are my child!"

"Oh yes, I'm your child all right, Mother, and I love you for being so concerned about my future."

"It seems that *my* ambition must do for the two of us."

Magali got up and came and sat at the foot of her daughter's bed. To-night she felt the need to be close to her, to touch her, to caress the young and lovely body, her own creation, to feel the beating of that simple and loving heart.

Claudette took her mother's hand and kissed it lovingly. Magali watched her, her eyes shining with tenderness. She gazed at her Claudette, her most precious possession, the child whom she had nearly lost in the cholera epidemic at Saigon, whom she had saved only by endless care and vigil after fighting for her life like a tigress. She looked wonderingly at her, feeling the most intense desire to make her happy, to see her crush all rivals and reach unimaginable heights, to watch her triumphant progress through life.

"Ambition, Mother!—You are steeped, saturated in ambition like a *baba* is in rum. Remember, pride comes before a fall!"

"Oh, dear, you are a stupid child. You talk like a little bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, you are Claudette Hobson!"

"So what? There are millions of pretty girls in this world. Hollywood's full of them, and they're all dying of starvation."

"Yes, but you, you're intelligent as well as beautiful. Claudette, one can always help fate. Will you listen to me carefully? Why did I decide to come to Shanghai? I told you once and I repeat it again; in order to get you married. Of course you'd have found a tolerably good husband in Indo-China. You could have married, as your friends did, an ordinary, average Frenchman, of average birth, average appearance, average intelligence, average income, in short, a man whom the matrimonial agencies describe as 'a gentleman suitable in every respect.' But do you imagine that I, a widow, at present free from all ties, would consent to bury myself in Saigon and condemn you to finish your life before having even begun it? No! No!! Besides, my dearest child, you know exactly how we stand; your father, when he died, left us precisely nothing, apart from two years' salary which the company owes me as his widow. A farthing, that's all. That settlement of ten thousand dollars which he gave me on our marriage, I returned to him in 1929 to gamble with; it was supposed to make us millionaires in six weeks—actually we lost the whole lot. So here we are, two lonely women on the rocks, with two years' pay ahead of us and then, nothing. And so I said to myself, 'You've got two years in which to settle Claudette.' Then suddenly came Uncle Larry's invitation; I knew his position here, so my reasoning was simple. I thought, 'Let's go and spend a few months with Uncle Larry. With his help and with his high connections in Shanghai, I'll bet Claudette will carry off the palm.'"

Claudette put her hand up like the best pupil in the class.

"Please, teacher! What is the 'palm' in this case?"

"I'll tell you, angel child! Oh, I can see it all so clearly in my mind! With Uncle Larry's help you'll be welcomed into Shanghai's smartest set. You'll meet an armament manufacturer, one of those

many who make millions by supplying Chiang Kai Shek's armies with machine-guns. You'll marry a man who throws pearls and diamonds at your feet. Or else you'll meet a diplomat from Peking. The English Ambassador or the Argentine Minister will fall madly in love with you. You'll become 'Her Excellency.' The newspapers will quote you as being the loveliest diplomat's wife in all the Corps Diplomatique of the Far East. What about that, my poppet?"

Claudette watched her mother's eyes lighting up with excitement as she evolved these ideas in her mind; she saw into her heart, so generous and yet so shrewd; so excitable and yet so worldly wise, romantic and yet cautious, passionate yet full of iron determination.

"Mother," she asked, "have you finished your lecture?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you know the limit of my ambitions? To marry a man who'll be *mine*, without money or position; a man who'll satisfy all my desires."

"Poor Claudette."

"Is that such an awful confession?"

"It's not awful; it's merely the old story of 'love in a cottage' spoken in the language of to-day. And what do you hope to get from this ideal man?"

"It's quite simple. My idea of a man is that he should be like a triple-expansion engine—that is to say, he must satisfy a woman's three needs, her heart, her mind and her passions."

"Go on, you interest me."

"Don't laugh, Mother. A man is perfect when you can absorb him simultaneously by those three component parts, if I may so express it. When one part fails, then the machine goes out of gear, and the engine no longer works smoothly. If the physical side is all right, but the mental side all wrong, that is to say, if you marry a sportsman, then you're only happy for two hours every night. You are left with twenty-two hours a day in which to pass the time with a half-baked lout who talks of nothing but football or horse-racing. If, on the other hand, you marry a sexless intellectual, you enjoy twenty-two hours of passionate argument, and end by longing for a Tarzan who will for two hours satisfy your physical desires."

"What are you driving at?"

"Just this. To get tied up to a man whose deficiencies you know in advance, is to walk open-eyed into a snare; like getting into a train without an engine and hoping that it will take you to the land of your dreams."

"What then?"

"Well then, Mother, you can surely understand that a girl like me, who takes marriage seriously and doesn't fancy the idea of a divorce case every six months, has no great interest in 'Excellencies' or millionaires; she's only concerned that her marriage should tick over nicely and smoothly."

"But, Claudette, you talk like an old-fashioned romantic. You belong to the age of button-boots, bustles and wasp-waists. It's bewildering to me. A lovely girl like you has a field-marshal's baton in her knapsack. You'd come back singing from the battlefield. And who'd be the person who was proudest of you? Why, your mother, watching from the wings."

"Mother, you're an angel. In the meantime, kiss me and let's hurry up and go to sleep. To-morrow Prince Charming will come knocking at the door and bow and say: 'Mademoiselle Claudette, the state coach awaits you.' "



The next morning, at five o'clock, no Prince Charming appeared, but instead the Chinese boy. He held a letter in his hand and with a broad smile announced:

"Missi Obson; car wait below, savvee? Chauffeur wantee answer."

II

MAGALI tore the letter from the boy's hand. She read the message hurriedly scribbled on Chinese rice paper with vertical red lines.

DEAR MAGALI,

I'm very sorry not to have been able to meet you at the quayside. I've only just returned from Sou-Chow where I had some business affairs to attend to. Please forgive me. The car will take you to my house. Cancel your rooms at the hotel—from now on you'll be staying with your old Uncle Larry—he's dying to meet his sister-in-law and his niece. Hurry up. There's a meal of rice and *saké* waiting for you.

Your affectionate

LARRY.

Magali's eyes lit up with pleasure. She called to the boy.

"Boy, tell the chauffeur that Missi Obson will be ready in half an hour with her luggage. . . . Savez?"

"Yes, Missi Obson. . . . Can do."

The boy disappeared. When Claudette had finished reading the letter, her mother seized her round the waist like a dashing hussar, whirling her about the room in a wild disorderly dance. It was the reaction after those long days of waiting. At last Uncle Larry had returned.

"Oh, kind Uncle Larry; what an original creature he must be!" cried Magali, as she hurriedly crammed her bags with clothes and lingerie. "You see, he writes on Chinese paper, and offers us rice and *saké* like a Se-Tchoven peasant. Ha ha, I've got an idea we're going to enjoy ourselves with Uncle Larry."

When they went down, they found no liveried chauffeur waiting for them with a sixteen-cylinder Cadillac, but instead a Chinaman in a dirty felt hat driving a rather worn-out old Ford car. Magali and Claudette, huddled up among the baggage, were too excited to criticize car or driver. They drove through the French concession, past the club and the police headquarters, arriving at last at Amoy Road, a boulevard which skirted the Chinese part of the town. It was by no means a smart district; tall white blocks of flats alternated with little shanties with small gardens, a curious combination of a Parisian suburb and a Chinese town, with green tiles on low roofs.

Magali looked with amazement at this part of Shanghai which stood so close to the real city with its thronging crowds and closely packed buildings. Why should rich Uncle Larry have chosen to live in this peculiar district?

Suddenly the car drew up with a grinding of brakes. Mother and daughter looked out and saw a small untidy garden, with no lawn or flowers, but only clusters of young bamboos. Beyond the garden stood a two-storied house with blue shutters and a flight of steps flanked by two grey stone dragons grinning grotesquely, wearing on their faces an expression fierce enough to frighten away any callers.

Magali, rather taken aback by this prospect, asked the chauffeur: "Is this really Mr. Larry Hobson's house?"

The sweaty-faced Chinaman was already unpacking the luggage.

"Yes, yes, Missi Obson," he said. "Master lives there with Missi. O.K., O.K. . . . Come on!"

Magali and Claudette exchanged a quick look. The chauffeur had said "with Missi." What might that mean? While the servant carried the luggage to the door Magali whispered, "Child, did you hear that? Can Uncle Larry be married?"

"Father never mentioned it to us."

"Strange!"

"I didn't imagine I should find an aunt in Shanghai."

"It's certainly queer. Why should he have kept this secret from us?"

Suddenly a loud voice came ringing across the garden. It was Uncle Larry coming to meet the two travellers. Tall, fat, wearing a khaki suit and Chinese slippers with leather soles, he looked about fifty-five. Unshaven, his hair a grey stubble, his stomach protruding like the bows of a ship, a cigar in his mouth, merriment in his eye, he was the perfect example of a retired sea captain, who had roughed it for many years in foreign parts, who had found whisky a consolation for a mis-spent life, and who had long ago cast off all civilized manners through living among cocoa-nut trees and coral reefs, consorting with pearl fishermen, with pirates of Bias Bay, Borneo traders, Singapore adventurers, sing-song girls of Tientsin, artisans of Fou-Chow, smugglers of the Yang-Tse-Kiang, and opium takers from Macao.

If one ignored his drinking habits, his loud voice, his rough manners, his unwashed appearance, one could not help liking this old devil, who spoke with a most pronounced nasal American twang, smelt of stale cigars, told bawdy stories, and was very generous with his money when he had any to spare.

He came forward, waving his hands like a signal-station at the approach of a storm. A cigar stump between his teeth, his stomach wobbling from side to side as he ran down the path, his blue eyes alight with pleasure, he shouted in the stentorian tones of a sea-captain bringing a ship to anchor, "There they are! Magali, Claudette! Welcome, both of you! I'd ordered a jazz band to play the Marseillaise, Ta-ra-ra-boom-di-ay and Viens poupoule, but they let me down. God, how swell they look, my relations from Saïgon! Let's see now; which is the mother and which the daughter? Look at me, you couple of little cats! Even prettier than their photos! Come on, aren't you going to give Uncle Larry a kiss?"

Magali and Claudette kissed him. It was impossible to resist the sailor's hearty welcome. Magali kissed her brother-in-law's cheek, thinking to herself, "He's certainly very nice, but my goodness he does smell!"

While the chauffeur ran to and fro with the boxes Larry talked and talked. You can stem a raging torrent with the Boulder Dam, but there was no stopping Larry's flow of conversation.

"Just imagine how mad I was at having to leave the moment you arrived. You weren't too bored at the hotel? No, Shanghai is still quite gay in spite of the Jap war. And how was the crossing?

Good? Poor Ben; I got a shock when I heard of his sudden end. I last saw him eight years ago at Penang. Poor chap. He was the smart lad of the family. Me, I'm the black sheep. However, one can be an old buster and still have a heart. The moment I heard the news, I said, 'My sister-in-law and my niece can't be allowed to die of hunger in Saigon on the pittance that Ben has left them. I'll get them to come and stay with me.'—'Another bowl of rice and the coffin merchant loses a customer,' as the Shanghai proverb says. But I'm keeping you standing in the garden . . . forgive me. Oh, just a moment before you come in and drink the tea of welcome. I must make a confession—I don't live alone in this house."

"You're married, Larry? Ben never told us."

Larry rolled his eyes at them in a bawdy fashion. He took Magali and Claudette each by an arm, and walking slowly towards the house explained in a low voice."

"Yes, I'm married. Actually, marriage is not the technical term for it. But remember it's really the same thing. I bought her ten years ago."

"I don't understand, Uncle Larry; you bought what?"

"My wife, of course. She's Chinese, from Sou-Chow, the market for beautiful women."

"Oh!"

"Yes. She's no longer in her first bloom. She's already twenty-four. She's called Madame Chance Suprême, and indeed she certainly had good luck in meeting up with an old fool like me. I paid her old procuress of a mother five hundred lovely Chinese dollars cash down for immediate possession. However, I don't regret it. If you'd seen her when she was fourteen! A jewel—a little goddess of China clay, with lovely virginal hands and a little angel face—but a sly artful little wretch if ever there was one, as loose in her morals as a trollop in the Nanking Road. Oh, Magali, these women! But we'll talk of that another time. Come on, children—I want to show you your new home."

He led them into a sitting-room which looked like a bazaar, with Chinese and European furniture and knick-knacks all jumbled up together. There was a valuable Coromandel screen next to an oil lamp in the horrible style of 1900; a bronze figure of Barbedienne, the Florentine page, next to a group of rosewood Buddhas, and a little regiment of Thibetan demons, who appeared to be seducing a group of yellow copper goddesses, waving their arms like fans above their heads, doubtless calling the Oriental Olympus to witness their happiness. Whenever the Chinese "boy" chose to do a bit of dusting, which was not often, stuffed flying fish were disclosed in odd corners, Javanese devil masks, a broken old radio

set, Kyoto enamels, Nara daggers, an old-fashioned phonograph, gold-embroidered flags, and a large portrait of Sun-Yat-Sen framed in ebony.

Uncle Larry handed the stump of his cigar to a monkey which was watching him from his perch, a whiskered gibbon who looked like an old Peer at the court of Charles X. Uncle Larry adored his monkey. He said to Claudette:

"Before you meet my wife you must first meet Mephisto. I picked him up in Celebean Isles—he was two weeks old, and I brought him up on a diet of rum and milk—he's so clever now that he can do anything bar talk. He rings the breakfast bell in the morning, smokes like a chimney, plays the flute with his feet and castanets with his tail. But come on, let's go upstairs; I'll show you your room."

Magali and Claudette crossed the passage which smelled of naphthalene, and entered an enormous double bedroom with two windows, Japanese paintings on the walls, a Louis Quinze dressing-table, a Louis Philippe *chaise-longue*, its frills and furbelows faded and discoloured, a pitchpine chest of drawers and a very moth-eaten purple brocaded armchair.

"There," said Uncle Larry proudly, as though he were showing his guests into Marie Antoinette's state apartments in Versailles. "This will be your own private room. Two big beds, every possible convenience. This door here opens on to the bathroom. The bath leaks, but I shall have it repaired. The geyser works by gas, and may burst if you run too much water. So take care." He opened the bathroom door and showed them a dirty, rusty bath. A Siamese cat slunk out between his legs with an angry snarl. Uncle Larry shouted.

"What are you doing in there, Svengali? Get out of my way, will you!" He then explained that it was his wife's favourite cat. "If it wasn't such a good mouser, I'd drown it in the Wang Poo—it makes poor Mephisto's life a misery."

"Have you any other animals besides Svengali and Mephisto, Uncle Larry?"

"Yes, a chameleon and a Brazilian macaw, I'll show them to you later—they're in the studio."

Magali and Claudette followed meekly behind their host. They crossed the dining-room and came into an artist's studio. If the sitting-room had been a bric-à-brac, the studio was more like a Noah's ark. It was a lumber-room of pictures, easels, stuffed birds, plaster casts, mandarins' robes, books strewn all over the floor, pieces of old Samurai armour, dried sharks' heads and empty whisky bottles. Hamlet, the chameleon, and Rasputin, the green and red macaw, put the final touches to the *décor*.

As Magali and Claudette set foot inside the room, Rasputin, bristling his comb, screamed at them.

"Hello, girls. *Couche couche?*"

"Don't listen to Rasputin, the old rogue," said Uncle Larry. "He can make love in seven languages." Then, pointing to his pictures, he said, "I'll show you my sketches later. I do a little amateur painting." He moved his hand vaguely towards a study of a naked negress, another of a sunset in Tahiti, and a study of moonlight on the Great Wall of China. "In fact I dabble about in here in the intervals of drinking gin-slugs. At least it's better fun than gossiping about one's neighbours. But come on, tea must be ready by now. Follow me, children."

They went down to the sitting-room. Uncle Larry seated his guests at the table, assumed the mysterious air of a conjurer about to produce a rabbit from a hat, and whispered:

"Now, I'm going to present you to my wife."



Uncle Larry clapped his hands. The chauffeur, who also acted as butler, appeared silently, took his orders in Shanghaiese, bowed and disappeared. Magali and Claudette had been through so much in the last quarter of an hour that they were prepared for anything. If Uncle Larry had produced an enormous Hottentot woman with a ring through her nose, they would not have been surprised; Claudette would have said quite calmly, "Good morning, Auntie."

But when the door opened and Madame Chance Suprême made her entry in a cream-coloured silken dress embroidered with scarlet and gold, Magali and Claudette stared open-mouthed. Uncle Larry had not exaggerated in his praise of her beauty. The pallor of her oval face was enhanced by the thick tuft of black hair which tumbled over her forehead. Her lively black slit eyes were delicately painted, and her prominent cheek-bones tinted with rouge. Her arms were thin, her ankles slim, her figure long and supple. Her dress, open on one side, revealed a stocking and a garter. She wore a jade necklace, and a cornelian signet ring on her index finger. Who would have thought that this "Child of Heaven," so beautifully-dressed, so carefully made-up, exquisitely shod, was no Manchurian Princess but the last-born of a Kiang-Si peasant woman, sold to an adopted mother, who had brought her up to be some white man's bedmate.

Uncle Larry shouted at his wife, who was staring at the two French women in a stupefied fashion.

"Come on, now . . . Have you lost the use of your tongue? Let

me introduce you all—Magali, my sister-in-law, Claudette, my niece, Madame Chance Suprême, my better half, generally known as Kiwi. Now come on, kiss each other, little pussies. No chi-chi nonsense, now!”

He pushed the Chinese girl towards Magali, and the three women kissed in a formal manner. Madame Chance Suprême was on her guard—she had summed up the two travellers with a glance, had appraised Magali's ripe beauty and Claudette's radiant youth. She had anticipated welcoming Larry's two impoverished relations from Shanghai in a kindly, condescending manner, but suspicion now took the place of sympathy. Madame Chance Suprême, known as Kiwi, was an orchid barbed with nettles. Mistrust was instinctive in her as in a panther advancing step by step through a treacherous forest. She was the offspring of a hundred generations of peasants, despoiled, ill-treated, tortured by deceitful Mandarins and ferocious Generals, and the mistrust ingrained in her and in her kind was beyond eradication. She was afraid of her own shadow, of her emotions and even afraid when spoken to. If anyone gave her an affectionate kiss, she trembled lest it might presage some future cruelty. She saw evil designs and diabolic purpose in the hearts of every stranger.

When Larry had told her of his brother's death at Saïgon and of his wish to invite his niece and sister-in-law to Shanghai, Madame Chance Suprême had instinctively frowned. Two unknown women in the house? Mistrust crept through her. Thinking again, she came to the conclusion that niece and sister-in-law were probably no different from so many other of those white women, wives and daughters of civil servants, without any particular good looks or outstanding personality—nice middle-class women, whose presence in Larry's house would constitute no menace for the future. But when she entered the drawing-room she knew at once that her first instincts had been right. How stupid she had been not to realize that this mother and daughter would bring trouble into the house. She had only to observe Magali's poise and Claudette's charm to realize that the west wind had blown two very dangerous birds from Cochín-China into the nest in the Amoy Road.

“Li!” cried Uncle Larry, “bring the cakes. And you, Kiwi, for God's sake do the honours of the house!”

Quietly, without hurrying, so as not to appear a servant, but rather a hostess in the eyes of the two white women, Madame Chance Suprême complied with a studied grace and an imperturbable expression on her face. She might have been offering tea to two relations or hemlock to two convicts. Every time she passed, Larry aimed a well-timed blow at her buttocks, and cried out:

"Come on, Kiwi, have you lost your tongue, or what? What do you think of your French relations?"

Madame Chance Suprême, lowering her beautiful slanting eyes, whispered in fairly correct English:

"I am very honoured to welcome in my master's house his dear relations from overseas."

"For God's sake, Kiwi," grumbled Uncle Larry, "none of this blasted ceremonial. Curse these Chinese formalities. We know all that rubbish about receiving our honourable relations into our humble and repulsive home, and that this tea is an unclean beverage unworthy of their distinguished lips, etc., etc. We know that, so you can skip it all. The ice is now broken, Kiwi. Sit down between Magali and Claudette. God, what a pretty picture! I feel like a Sultan with three houris. Fate is too good to me." He half-closed his eyes, like a painter appraising a colour-scheme, and added: "It's odd. You're all three brunettes, and yet each one's hair is of a different shade. Claudette is the fairest of the three, almost chestnut; Magali has red tints in her hair, and you, Kiwi, have bluish tints. One day I'll have to experiment on you all with my paint-brush."

They again began to talk of poor Ben's death, of the difficult times in which they lived, of the tension in Europe, and of the Sino-Japanese war. Madame Chance Suprême watched her neighbours out of the corner of her eyes, clenching her delicate hands on her tiny handkerchief, which she then stuffed into the narrow sleeve of her coat.

Suddenly Larry got up and said to his sister-in-law, "Magali, here's the programme for this evening. I've arranged a small informal dinner to celebrate your arrival. We'll have a little champagne cup, and a large bottle of whisky. Mephisto will ring the bell at eight o'clock. I've invited three charming boys and a nice married couple; he's a Parsee and she a Russian—a marriage between the Towers of Silence and the bells of the Kremlin. Meanwhile, Kiwi, look after these ladies. See that they have soap, towels, etc. I bet that within five minutes you'll all be chattering away together like parrots. Children, 'hasta luego!' Kiwi! Come and give poppa a kiss."

Madame Chance Suprême obeyed meekly but without interest, her hands folded behind her back. Uncle Larry left the room, the parquet boards creaking under his weight, waddling like a pig snuffling for truffles.

A few minutes later, Magali and Claudette found themselves alone in their room. So numbed were they by this sequence of calamities that at first they could not speak. Like "*Les deux Perettes*" in La Fontaine's fable they could have sung in chorus,

"Adieu, calves, cows, pigs, and little chickens"—in other words, "Farewell to our happy dreams in Saigon! Farewell to our visions of luxury, elegance and riches! Farewell, millionaire uncle, dandy of Shanghai and arbiter of fashion!" All the wonders which Magali had dreamt of in Saigon were shattered in half an hour by stern reality. It was such a cruel and brutal disappointment, that the minds of mother and daughter were still numbed. Magali suffered more than her daughter. She had collapsed on to the *chaise-longue* with its threadbare coverlet, and was gazing in despair at the two doubtful-looking beds, at the little dressing-table, fly blown and stained by old scent-bottles and at the three little torn towels which Madame Chance Suprême had hung up near the bathroom; she gazed out of the window at the roofs of the Chinese city, visible between a factory chimney and a wireless pylon rising from a large cement building. Everything was sad, dirty and depressing. And to crown all came a confused babel of voices from a motley crew of refugees, shuffling down the Amoy Road, escorted by the police of the Concession. They were driving these wretches back into some prison camp, God knew where—it didn't matter.

Claudette guessed her mother's state of mind, and tried to drive away her depression. She asked:

"Mother, what do you think of your Chinese sister-in-law?"

"Oh, dear," said Magali. Usually so disposed to talk, her voice now tailed away in misery.

"Darling," she said softly, "go and see if she's listening behind the door. One never knows with these Chinese locusts."

Claudette opened the door quickly. The passage was empty, except for the Siamese cat who tried to slink past. Claudette shushed him away. He rushed off with an offended air.

At last Magali seemed to regain her power of speech. She controlled herself with an effort.

"No, no, no! It's beyond human endurance. Your poor father was terribly to blame for hiding the truth about Uncle Larry. Nobody asked him to put his brother on a pedestal. Why did he have to bluff us about his social rank? Here we are, after eight days on the sea, stranded in a Shanghai suburb, with an old beachcomber who breeds chameleons and macaws, and a Chinese girl who welcomes us like an icicle, and who's obviously at this very moment hatching a secret plot with the nearest druggist."

"What *do* you mean, Mother?"

"I mean she's busy mixing a brew of tiger's whiskers and cyanide of potassium which will knock us flat in three minutes."

"Oh, don't exaggerate, for goodness' sake!"

"Very well. Let's admit I am a bit pessimistic. But aren't you at the end of your tether, darling, too?"

"Listen, Mother. I don't pretend to have foreseen all this, but in my heart of hearts I always had misgivings about this wonderful uncle of mine."

"But for years on end your father had dinned it into our ears!"

"Yes, I know; my poor father was always excessively proud of his relations. He hid from you the exact social position of his parents in Ohio. We should have taken the legend of Uncle Larry with a grain of salt. Besides, he's not such a bad old thing after all."

"Yes, but his breath smells of alcohol and stale cigars."

"But he's kind-hearted."

"Yes, and he shouts at his Sou-Chow mistress like a sergeant-major."

"Don't let's fuss! It won't get us anywhere."

Magali got up off the *chaise-longue*, feeling a little better. She stretched herself:

"You're right. Mephisto, Svengali, Hamlet, Rasputin! We've arrived in a menagerie. Let's unpack our luggage and make ourselves comfortable."

Magali began to undress and walked into the bathroom. Five minutes later Claudette heard a scream. She opened the door. Her mother, standing half-naked, pointed to a fanlight above another barricaded door which they hadn't at first noticed. She cried out:

"God, how she frightened me!"

"Who, Mother. Who frightened you?"

"Kiwi. Why, I was just about to open my pot of cold cream when I suddenly saw a face above the doorway spying at me, I turned round quickly, and the face disappeared. It was Madame Chance Suprême, already trying out her spying tricks. What damned cheek! Getting up on a chair to look at me in the bath! I'll tell her what I think of her when I get downstairs, that monkey creature."

"Mother, it's much better you shouldn't quarrel with our uncle's pet lamb on the first day of our arrival."

"Very well, child. But one day I'll teach her a lesson, all the same."



The guests that night at dinner certainly did not belong to Shanghai's smart set. The first "charming boy" was called Harry Schweezer, who sold Canton shawls and other silk fabrics in a shop

in the Foukien Road—a little Jew with crimped auburn hair and chubby red cheeks, bold as a cock-sparrow. The second, one of Larry's oldest friends, was chief mechanic on board the S.S. *Formosa*, a little cargo boat which traded along the coast between Tientsin and Hongkong. He was called Homer Dodds. Tall, gaunt, and very pale, with a narrow face like the backbone of a cuttlefish, his favourite habit was to challenge Larry to drinking bouts and by degrees sink into a slow and dignified stupor, like a retired admiral. The third was a cross-breed from Macao, half-Portuguese, half-Chinese, known to all as Alfredo, a thirty-year-old "beau garçon," thin and *svelte*, with artificially waved hair, dark dreamy eyes and the sensual mouth of a gigolo. He was Madame Chance Suprême's particular choice for the evening, and she showed unusual interest in him. The Russo-Parsee couple completed the picture; he, Neruwallah by name, a traveller for a pearl firm in Bombay, fat, sallow-skinned and perpetually smiling, whose death, one felt, would bring down the vultures from the Malabar Hill to eat lavishly of his huge carcass in honour of Zoroaster. His wife, Liouba, was a Russian *émigrée*, née Dragomiroff, whom he had rescued from a life of sin and converted into an honest woman. Liouba was tall and large-breasted, with a ravenous appetite, exquisite manners, and an ingrained habit of never saying no to any man who asked her politely to go to bed with him.

The Chinese dinner, cooked by Chang and his honourable younger brother, Chung, dished up by the chauffeur Li and his honourable cousin Hou, Madame's laundry-maid, consisted of six dishes; "poisson mandarin" with sugar and vinegar, roast sucking pig, macédoine chop suey de luxe, litchis, shrimps with young bamboo shoots, Yun-Nan ham, and giblets of minced chicken brought to the boil.

Magali sat on Uncle Larry's right and Claudette on his left. Madame Chance Suprême had on one side of her Mr. Neruwallah, and on the other the S.S. *Formosa's* chief mechanic, who was drinking *saké* like water from a tap. Magali, holding her fork delicately and eating very little, was able to watch Liouba exchange looks with Alfredo, who in his turn rolled his eyes meaningly at the sensuous Kiwi. Magali felt inclined to shout out "Set to partners," like the Master of Ceremonies at Court Balls at Tsarkoie Selo.

When the rice had been served in blue earthenware finger-bowls, Uncle Larry ordered the champagne. Corks popped, glasses sparkled. Larry drank to his relations' health. Mr. Homer Dodds, already in a merry mood, rose to his feet and stammered out: "Gentlemen, let's drink to Magali's beauty, to Claudette's grace,

to Liouba's sex-appeal, to—er—er well, to Kiwi's knack . . . er—er, I mean to her . . .”

“Drink up, old boy, and sit down,” said Uncle Larry. Then, turning to Li, he said, “Bring the bottles to the studio.”

The guests entered the Noah's ark, where tea and liqueurs were already served. The room, illuminated, resembled a fantastic wizard's cave. Hamlet, the chameleon, asleep in his cage, looked like a beast of the Apocalypse. Rasputin, the parrot, excited by the gabble of talk, tried to show off his repertoire as a linguist: “Hullo, son of a bitch . . . Kwak! Kwak! Je vous aime! Currouitt! Kiss me! Encore! Encore! Danke schön! Ta gueule! Mama mia!” and ended off by whistling Maurice Chevalier's “Valentine,” which he had once learned from a barman in far-off Sourabaya.

While Claudette was with difficulty fending off the advances of the cross-breed who was being indecently amorous in order to arouse the jealousy of Madame Chance Suprême, Magali stood aside watching the jollifications with a feeling of intense misery. It was only eleven o'clock, but Uncle Larry and Homer Dodds, each with a glass of whisky in his hand, were already singing bawdy barrack-room songs, and giving each other playful knocks and shoves. Madame Chance Suprême was prowling like an angry cheetah round Alfredo and Claudette, and the little Jew, Schweezer, obsessed by the handsome Liouba, was offering her all the treasures of his warehouse in exchange for a secret rendezvous. The Parsee, eternally smiling and vulgarly obsequious, having in all probability misjudged Magali's financial status, was doing his utmost to interest her in a nice little proposition concerning a bargain in pearls.

At one in the morning Uncle Larry and Homer Dodds had ceased their bawdy singing. They were dead drunk. Madame Chance Suprême had at last managed to corner Alfredo and was telling him what she thought of his behaviour with that doll-like product of Western Civilization. The Parsee, for want of something better to do, was stroking Rasputin, now exhausted and drooping on his perch, while Harry Schweezer, the little Jew, by dazzling Liouba with visions of the treasures of Golconda had eventually succeeded in dragging her into the passage, where he was fondling and kissing her with the ardour of an over-excited little cockerel.

Claudette whispered in her mother's ear:

“Mother, I've had enough; this half-caste disgusts me. He keeps mauling me about, and I am sure Kiwi's going to kill me. Do let's go to bed.”

“Yes, let's go. Uncle Larry's as drunk as a pig, and the others will soon disentangle themselves. Let's slip quietly away.”

They crept out and locked themselves in their room. Claudette went into the bathroom, while her mother, quite overcome, collapsed fully dressed on to her bed. She started sobbing into the pillows, her nerves at breaking-point. What an evening! What *frightful* people! The chief mechanic, the pearl trader, the maddening little shopkeeper, that horrid oiled and scented gigolo! What would to-morrow hold in store for them, closeted as they were with whisky-sodden old Uncle Larry and that vindictive and mysterious Kiwi?

Magali sobbed so loudly that Claudette heard her from the bathroom and came out. She leant over her mother and tried to calm her.

"Mother, Mother, what's the matter? Are you ill?"

And Magali gulped out between her sobs, "No, there's nothing the matter with me . . . poor darling child, what's to become of us!"

III

MAGALI and Claudette were still asleep when they were awakened with a jump by the noise of a bell which grew louder and louder, faded away and grew louder again.

"Good God, what is it? A fire-alarm?"

Claudette reassured her mother.

"No, Mother; don't you remember? It's Mephisto ringing the breakfast bell."

"Let him ring and ring. I'm not going to be woken by a monkey at this hour of the morning."

"I'm going to sleep again!"

"So am I."

Magali had passed a restless night, full of bad dreams. She tried to go to sleep again, but was reawakened by two knocks on the door. Li came in.

"Excuse me, Missi Obson," he said. "Master asks me to tell you that Mephisto has rung too early. Master has the hangover. Breakfast is not till two o'clock in the afternoon, *savez?*"

Li bowed and went out. Magali thumped the pillows in a rage.

"Fancy disturbing us to tell us that!"

It was half-past two when Uncle Larry's "breakfast" of eggs

and bacon was served in the dining-room. Madame Chance Suprême had a headache, and was still asleep in her special quarters behind the house. It was the custom of the country that she should live away from the house with an old *amah*, who acted as duenna and maid of all work, and her laundry-man Hou, Li's cousin.

Uncle Larry, sitting at the "breakfast" table, certainly had "the hangover" all right. He was in pyjamas, slippers and a dressing-gown. His eyes were dark-ringed, his eyelids puffy, and he kept yawning like a seal in the sunshine. To excuse his bad manners he grumbled:

"That damned old Homer. He always gets me drinking like a fish. In future, Magali, you'll please stop me. Say, 'Larry, you've had enough,' and I swear I won't touch another drop."

Claudette went back to her room to tidy up her clothes. Larry took his sister-in-law into the sitting-room, suggesting that they should have a talk. He shut the door, lit his pipe, and began.

"Dear Magali, now that we're alone together, let's talk openly. Tell me straight; when I wrote to you at Saïgon to invite you to stay here with Claudette, what did you expect?"

Magali, taken by surprise at this direct approach, did not dare speak her mind. She answered, controlling herself with an effort:

"I thought that your suggestion was a very kind one."

"Yes, of course, of course. But what picture of me had you formed in your mind?"

"The picture that poor Ben had given me."

"And what did Ben say about me?"

"He told us that you'd been captain of a cruiser, that you'd left the navy in order to speculate in Shanghai, that you were a millionaire, that you were one of the *élite* of the Concession, and so on and so forth. You know Ben; he was fond of you and looked up to you."

Uncle Larry sucked at his pipe; he sighed.

"Yes, I see; Ben stuffed you up with false ideas about me. He certainly had a vivid imagination, my poor departed brother. Evidently he gloried in the idea of having a millionaire relative in Shanghai. Poor boy. God rest his soul, and forgive him his little lies. For you see, Magali dear, now that we're face to face with the truth, it's useless to pretend. Larry Hobson, here before your eyes, has never been captain of a cruiser—he was only quarter-master on board a small mine-sweeper in the U.S. navy. His millions were entirely imaginary. He once got as far as being captain of a foreign trading vessel, and is not dying of starvation, of course. But all the money he possesses, which is not much, is

earned by working behind the scenes for one of the most important men in town. There you have the truth."

"I believe you, Larry."

"The result being that you, Ben's widow, with a young girl in your care, and two years' salary to come, are faced with the everlasting problem, how to earn your daily bread. I wanted to help you as far as I could by offering you the shelter of my hearth and home. But there's the future to think of."

"Yes, dear Larry, don't I know it!"

"You realize that I'm unable to entertain both of you in luxury, so one day we shall have to consider some practical method of assuring your livelihood. There's no immediate hurry, of course. We'll talk of it another time."

"Larry, you mentioned just now some important man whom you worked for in Shanghai. I don't want to be indiscreet, but who is he?"

Larry rolled his fat stomach with laughter and, shaking his fat fingers at her, he said:

"Oh, you women: you're all as curious as magpies. One only has to mention a mystery man and immediately you dreadful creatures prick up your ears. Well, Magali, since it's you I'm talking to, I'll tell you, under pledge of secrecy, mind, that I'm working for a man who holds all Shanghai in the hollow of his hand. If you knew the town, and the people of the International Concession, you'd gasp with excitement merely to hear his name mentioned. Of course, I speak metaphorically—a woman of the world like you never *gasps* with astonishment, she merely flickers her eyelashes. However, about this man for whom I act secretly—it's quite simple—he's the uncrowned King of Shanghai. He has everything—money, shrewdness, the luck of the devil and, the cruelty of an egoist. Some people hate him, and others eat out of the palm of his hand; he has rivals who want to kill him and accomplices—er, I beg your pardon, I should say associates, who pray nightly to the thousand Buddhas of the Green Pagoda to keep him alive; he's one of those astonishing people whom one would either like to sock in the eye or kneel down and worship."

Uncle Larry tapped the end of his pipe against the arm of his chair, and calmly scratched the hair on his chest through his half-open pyjama jacket. Magali had been listening with the keenest attention. She enquired:

"He's got no name, this King of Shanghai?"

"Yes, child: he's called Count Stoltizine."

"A Russian!"

"Why not? Powdered and scented gangsters spring up in strange

places; sometimes they're products of broccoli-sellers in Chicago suburbs; sometimes they're the bastard offspring of Russian countesses in Tsarkoe-Selo. As the cook on one of my cargo-boats once expressed it, 'Vice is like cheese—the choicer it is, the more it stinks.' This Count Stolitizine—incidentally he never uses his title in Shanghai, except to impress snobs—he's known everywhere quite simply as Boris—is a type who ought to be stuffed and put in a museum. Even I, who've known him for years and who've mixed with every sort and kind of person in the Far East, who've shaken hands with murderers, slept in leper huts, delivered a Bali woman whom the village sorceress had condemned to death, who, in fact, am no longer astonished at anything in heaven or hell—I swear to you that this Boris man staggers me. Magali, have you ever tried to catch a live eel? Well, I'll tell you—an eel's a tame rabbit compared to Boris. Morally speaking, of course. His mind is as bright as the purest jade, sharp and subtle to the point of getting in first with your objection to his own schemes. People are just pawns in his game—he handles them with incredible skill. A ruined man in Petrograd in 1920, poverty-stricken in Manchuria in 1921, worth a million taels in 1928 and since then growing ten times richer every year. Boris, my dear, is to-day worth fifty million Chinese dollars, cash down, not counting investments in India, Brazil and so on. They've tried to assassinate him three times—to shoot, stab and poison him, at Kharbine, Canton and Peking. So you see I'm right in saying that he knows his onions. He's given good proof of it."

Uncle Larry scratched his back, and continued, nodding his head like a wise old owl:

"In fact, I owe him everything, this damned Boris. He makes me work very hard; I have to take risks; but it enables me to live." Larry chuckled with delight and a sly look came into his eyes. "And, Magali my dear, with women he's a cinch. God, he's never failed yet. I'm never bored when I go out with him. If I fancy any woman he gets her for me in five seconds, just like that. A cheque from Boris will get you the finest 'moll' in all China. Just imagine—a man whose signature the great Chiang Kai Shek accepts without a guarantee! A cheque from Boris will get you a kiss from the loveliest piece of skirt in all the Far East. The little succulent larks fall nicely toasted into his bed. That ruffian!—he's got something which fetches these women before you've got time to crunch a plate of nuts. He catches all the pretties like a bird-catcher with glue. And they all swoon under the devil's charm. It's incredible how much havoc he's wrought in Shanghai in his ten years' residence."

Mephisto, the monkey, interrupted the conversation. Li had

let him loose, and he was running about the room, lolloping on his long legs like an overgrown child. He clasped Magali round the legs, and she let out a scream—then he put his arms round his master's neck, embracing it affectionately.

"Well, Mephisto? You want to go out for a little walk with Poppa? Come on then, old boy, we'll go." Uncle Larry got up. Magali was still stupefied by Larry's talk. Count Stoltzine assumed amazing proportions in her mind; he appeared to her like a hero in a fairy tale, a mixture of Don Juan and Cartouche, of Beau Brummel and Landru, of the Duc de Morny and Al Capone. Larry's picturesque language was just the thing to stimulate Magali's imagination. She cursed Mephisto for interrupting their *tête-à-tête*, and could have listened for hours to her brother-in-law's talk. Magali called him back just as he was leaving the room with his monkey. Trying to appear disinterested, she said casually, "Larry, you've given such a vivid picture of Boris, that I'd rather like to meet him one of these days."

Larry's manner at once stiffened. He suddenly put on a pious expression, as though Boris was the Grand Lama, invisible to ordinary mortal eyes. "You really think that Boris is so easily approached? Magali, you must be patient. He's at present in Nanking, where he has important business matters to attend to with Wang-Ching-Wei's revolutionary government. But if you're really interested, I'll try and arrange a meeting later."

And Uncle Larry waddled out of the room, Mephisto holding him by the hand like a nurse-maid.



Magali and Claudette were in bed. It was the hour of whispered confidences. After the fleeting glimpse that Magali had had of Madame Chance Suprême at her spy-hole behind the glass door, she was suspicious. Mother and daughter had dragged their beds closer to each other, and now began to discuss the situation with all the presence of mind they could compass. They tried to take their bearings.

"It amounts to this, child," said Magali, "we're in the soup right up to our necks. The image of an uncle rolling in money has proved a mirage. Let's face facts. You won't get to know people in this house."

"I can go elsewhere for my adventures, Mother."

"Don't joke, darling. It's a serious matter. The more so because

Uncle Larry, while gabbling away in that expansive manner of his, hinted that we should sooner or later have to find a way of earning our living. He's quite right, too. The two years' salary which the company owes me, I shall put aside in case of illness. You see, one never knows."

"Mother, you've got all the virtues of a good French housewife."

"Well, naturally, darling. What about a sudden attack of appendicitis? You can't go on living with your head in the sand."

"Nor on an empty stomach."

"What I'd like to know is whether Uncle Larry has any work in mind for me."

"For me, too. It's my business to work, and yours to relax, Mother darling."

"Well, we won't argue about that, darling child. Perhaps Uncle Larry will get his influential employer to help us out of our difficulties."

"Do you *really* believe in this mysterious Boris, Mother dear?" Claudette's sceptical smile made Magali jump with astonishment.

"Really, Claudette!"

It had never occurred to her that there could be any doubt about this mysterious King of Shanghai. Her imagination had been so fired by Larry's account that it seemed as though she knew him already. Not to believe in the existence of Boris! Why it was sheer heresy, like doubting the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Magali had repeated to Claudette word for word her whole conversation with Larry, with the usual frills attached. The mid-day sunshine enhanced the beauty of the picture. Boris, no longer a mere Count, had become a Grand Duke. His million taels had become a million golden dollars. It was typical of Magali to exaggerate and make everything more radiant than it really was. Her imagination defied natural laws, the law of gravity and Euclid's three dimensions! A withered pea turned into a melon. An old fiddler in the street became Kreisler himself. A single kiss became a night of passion. Boris's exploits in Shanghai as pictured by Magali were like Mother Goose stories converted into Casanova's Memoirs and "Gamiani's Nights."

Magali was sitting up in bed, looking like a nun who had just heard a disquieting statement from an apostate and is tortured by religious doubts. She kept repeating:

"Claudette, you don't suggest that Uncle Larry invented all this?"

"Well, Father invented an imaginary Larry. Why shouldn't Uncle Larry have invented a fabulous Boris? It's in the family."

"Really, child, what are you saying!"

"What I mean is—this Boris is perhaps only a carpet seller or a casino croupier."

"What! You think Uncle Larry invented this whole story? That's *out of the question*! I know he's a bit of an old lout, rough and coarse in his manners, but at least he's honest."

"Well, Mother, I agree. I only hope this Boris of his gives us something to think about."

Magali now looked pensive. She lay back in bed for a long time without speaking and then, as she put out the light, gave her final verdict:

"Darling, I'll make careful enquiries about Boris. I intend to get to the bottom of it all."



Madame Chance Suprême was in the act of administering a sound thrashing with a bamboo cane to her *amah* when Magali knocked on the door. The Chinese girl was in the habit of venting her suppressed rages on her unfortunate and faithful slave, "Jasmine Petal." "Jasmine Petal," alas no longer worthy of her exotic name, for she was very faded, fawned upon her young mistress, whimpering and whining her innocence. Usually she was entirely guiltless of any crime, but like a devoted dog who for years has been accustomed to kicks, threats, whippings and general ill-usage, she would fondle the hand which beat her, mumbling the while magic phrases intended to ward off evil spirits.

That morning Madame Chance Suprême's rage was occasioned by her duenna's failure as a spy. She had been ordered to report the whole conversation between her noble Lord and Master, Larry, and his two relations from the West. Madame Chance Suprême's suspicions were far from being allayed, and her mind was still obsessed with the presence of these two women in the house in Amoy Road. Had Magali come in order to supplant her? Or to marry off her daughter to Larry? Or perhaps to spy on Kiwi herself, and to tell Larry about these guilty love-affairs of hers? Or by practising some secret European magic on her, kill her by a slow and lingering death? All one night she and her *amah* had remained awake discussing these various hideous possibilities, crouching side by side under a red-lacquered Ning-Po cheval glass, in the light of a solitary yellow lantern, talking in faint whispers, hardly moving their lips as they spoke. Their whisperings envisaged all sorts of dreadful probabilities, night-

mare dramas enacted by the most malevolent of evil spirits. The *amah*, clad in her tight white blouse and black trousers, shuddered as her wild thoughts translated the dread apprehensions of her mistress into actual happenings already half fulfilled. . . . These two white women from Saigon were familiars of the evil ones and nursed in their black hearts the most sinister designs . . . Eventually, at about five in the morning, they had decided to call in the Buddhist nun, Ta-Yu, a sorceress whom all the ladies of the best Chinese society consulted when in serious trouble. Her fees were heavy, but her judgments infallible.

"Jasmine Petal" had gone to visit the nun, who lived a long way off, near Chapei—a wizened old beldame, bent with age, dressed in black from head to foot, wrinkled like a rotten pear and wearing round her neck a chaplet of a hundred and eight beads, representing the hundred and eight provinces of the Phrabat. She cleverly interrogated the *amah*, and sent her back with instructions that Madame Chance Suprême was to beware of two strange females arriving from across the ocean within two spaces of time, with warnings of baneful influences, of danger arising to the house, of strange portents before the tenth moon, etc. These oracular prophecies had done nothing to alleviate Madame Chance Suprême's suspicions.

So this morning, as Magali knocked on the door, Madame Chance Suprême was revenging herself on "Jasmine Petal" for having failed in her duty as a spy. The knocking on the door interrupted the well-timed blows planted by Madame Chance Suprême on her duenna's back.

"Who is it," said Madame Chance Suprême.

"It's me, Magali."

The bamboo cane came to a standstill in mid-air. The *amah* scrambled to her feet. "Go and open the door," whispered her mistress. "It's the Lord and Master's sister-in-law. Then go into the next room and stay there in case of danger." The *amah* dabbed her eyes, drew back the latch of the door, and bowed politely.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," said Magali with an amiable and friendly smile.

"It is an honour, I assure you," answered Madame Chance Suprême, folding her pretty hands over her morning dress, a black dress seamed with heliotrope. "To what am I indebted for my sister-in-law's kind visit?"

"In the first place, I wished to see your house, Kiwi. Larry told me yesterday that you had furnished it with wonderful taste."

Magali's first intention had been to rebuke Kiwi for having spied on her the previous day. Now she had decided to alter her tactics and win her over by flattery.

"Oh, it is a very humble abode, I fear," said Kiwi, her eyes lowered on the ground. "Would you care to come into my bedroom?"

They entered a dark room containing a square red lacquer bed, protected on either side by two ebony screens inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The walls were hung with strips of rice paper, adorned with Chinese writing painted by expert hands. Magali stopped in front of Kiwi's dressing-table. She praised the purity of her skin, and asked her the secret of her beauty. Kiwi, responding in the same tone of assumed affability, gave a totally inaccurate description of the ingredients of her special creams and lotions. Underneath her apparent youthful ingenuousness lay the cunning of a hardened liar. Kiwi did not believe in her visitor's sincerity, and kept looking at her out of corners of her eyes, fearing she was about to cast an evil spell on the bed or on the sofa. She remembered how an old grey-beard in the village of Kiang-Si, where she was born, had once told her a ghastly tale of the satanism of the white races. She was not going to take any risks with this white woman who spoke with the assurance of a colonel and seemed to be afraid of nothing.

But when Magali suddenly turned the conversation on to the subject of Boris, Kiwi was quite disconcerted. She was so convinced that the white woman had designs on Larry, either for herself or her daughter, that she momentarily lost her poise; as a duellist, certain the enemy is about to lunge, leaves herself open to the thrust.

Magali, for her part, had more than one trick up her sleeve. Her idea in paying this morning visit had been nothing more than to extract from Kiwi all that she knew about the Russian adventurer. So, employing the classical feint, she suddenly burst out in a friendly, confiding manner:

"Kiwi, my dear, do you realize that Larry started teasing me yesterday about this mysterious Boris. He told me that sometime ago you made advances to Boris, and that Boris rebuffed you in favour of a pretty girl from Canton. I'm sure he was lying to me. I can't conceive of any white man remaining impervious to a beautiful Chinese girl like you."

"My good sister-in-law overwhelms me! But as far as Boris is concerned, that story is quite untrue. I have never had any designs on Boris, because I know he prefers white women. Boris is not attracted by Chinese girls or girls from Canton or elsewhere."

"Indeed? Tell me now, who is this Boris that everyone talks about?"

"Boris, oh, he's just a Russian."

"I've heard the most fantastic accounts of him."

"Why? Because he's rich? He's not the only rich man in Shanghai."

"You must know a lot about him, seeing that your husband works for him."

"Larry told you that?"

"Yes."

Kiwi thought: "Larry talks too much. He was wrong to discuss things so openly with his sister-in-law. In any case if this woman is so interested in Boris, I shall not satisfy her curiosity." Her suspicious mind again began to work. Why did Magali want to know about Boris—it must be because she intended to intrigue against Larry, to undermine his position and reduce him to poverty."

"There's nothing extraordinary about Boris," she said, chewing a piece of rice paper in her mouth. "He's just a business man."

"What sort of a business man?"

"Just a business man," said Kiwi, with a vague meaningless gesture. Business, for her, meant either exchanging a bale of cotton for a tin of treacle, or murdering a creditor to avoid paying an urgent debt. In China, business deals are made up of a strange chemical composition, comprising sulphate of philanthropy and chlorohydrate of vengeance.

Kiwi's answers were not what Magali had hoped for. She realized that her sister-in-law was hedging. Losing patience she said abruptly:

"Really, Kiwi, one would think you were afraid of this man Boris."

"Oh no. But why waste time discussing such an unimportant person?"

"Very well, if you think Boris so unimportant, then all I can say is that Larry must have an incredible imagination. The real truth must lie sandwiched somewhere between the giant and the pigmy."

Magali realized that she was merely wasting her time with the Chinese girl, and said good-bye to her. No sooner had she left than Kiwi called to "Jasmine Petal," dragged her to the darkest corner of the room, and whispered tragically, "My sister-in-law is even more devilish than I had suspected. Do you know why she asked me about the Russian? Because she's hatching a plot against Mr. Larry. She wants to upset the household and cast a

spell over us. Take care, 'Jasmine Petal'; watch those two white women carefully. To-morrow I'm going to visit the pagoda in Goldsmith's Alley to burn three incense sticks and pray the good spirits to protect us from these harpies."

IV

MAGALI and Claudette had now been living for a week in Uncle Larry's house, and they were still in the same state of uncertainty. Larry's activities were mysterious. The servants said nothing. Kiwi's *amah* crept round the house like an intangible ghost. Was Larry still connected with his foreign trading vessel? Or was he speculating on the exchange as Boris's secret agent? Or was he engaged in supplying armaments to Chinese nationalists in their struggle against the Japanese invaders?

Larry always side-tracked his sister-in-law's questions in the same jocular, familiar tone.

"Oh, I just potter about. In Asia everyone potters about. Great men like Boris juggle with millions. Old fools like me pick up the crumbs."

Only one certainty emerged from this maze of secrecies and subterfuges; the powerful personality of Boris. Magali had returned from her interview with Kiwi convinced that she had lied in pretending that Boris was just an ordinary Russian like anyone else. She must get to the bottom of the Boris problem by making enquiries from the best source.

When Magali had married Ben Hobson, she had become an American citizen, and had an American passport. It was now no longer valid, so she called at the United States Consulate to get it renewed. Cecil Raeburn, one of the vice-consuls to whom she had a letter of introduction, received her most affably, offering her a cigarette and telling her to make herself at home. Magali was quick to seize the opportunity of talking about Boris. Raeburn, who had been ten years *en poste* in China, drew in his breath with surprise.

"Oh, Mrs. Hobson, if you know Count Stolitzine, then you've got the 'Open Sesame' into Shanghai society."

"Do you really mean that? I've heard a great deal about that remarkable individual."

"If, to speak crudely, you've heard that he is a 'big bug,' then you've certainly heard the truth. He's more than merely rich; he's influential as well. And his influence is *sub rosa*. He's actually a secret agent between Tokio and Chung-King. He's achieved the most incredible feat of being *persona grata* both with the Japs and with their enemies. In our consular circles we regard Count Stolitzine as a sort of ambassador *in partibus*, a secret liaison agent between the two camps."

"But, Mr. Raeburn, tell me *please*, is Boris a bandit or a gentleman?"

A look of irony came into the Vice-Consul's eyes; he gently knocked the ash off the end of his cigar, and replied:

"We live in an age, Mrs. Hobson, in which bandits know the rules of good behaviour better than 'Emily Post,' and self-taught 'gentlemen' have steeped themselves in literature about well-known European crooks. Nowadays you need to be a priest or a very clever fortune-teller to separate the wheat from the chaff. When Boris invites you to one of his receptions——"

"I beg your pardon! Does Boris live in Shanghai?"

"Yes, in a magnificent villa in the French Concession. In all its proportions it's an exact replica of the 'Petit Trianon,' transported into the land of pagodas. All the *beau monde* of Shanghai dine and sup with Boris, even the most stand-offish, even those who count their quarterings as 'Harpagon' counted his pennies. The Stolitzines, first ennobled by Catherine the Great, can show such an imposing pedigree of Lord Chamberlains, Generals, Aides-de-Camp, and Masters of the Imperial Household, that even the English Ambassador in Peking, Sir Launcelot Wells, would be annoyed if he were not invited to stay with Boris on his way through Shanghai."

Magali left the Consulate and walked back to Amoy Road in a wild state of excitement. If a man as well-informed as Mr. Raeburn spoke of Boris in such terms as these, then Larry's estimate of him was not after all so fantastic. And if she and Claudette could obtain access to Boris through the medium of Uncle Larry, there was a ray of hope for both of them. Obviously, Uncle Larry was only a very minor cog in the wheels of Boris's infernal machine, but Magali felt confident that with the exercise of a little cunning she could force the most closely guarded door.



Uncle Larry was not an exhibitionist, but he had the annoying habit of not properly adjusting his dress in front of women. In

Kiwi's case this did not matter. Larry had bought her from the procuress at Sou-Chow, whose business it was to hatch out pretty girls, as a hen hatched chickens. Kiwi, like others of her kind, knew her rights and her duties, according to the customs of her country. In exchange for board and lodging and the usual little extra treats, she must submit to the vagaries of her lord and master; endure his bursts of ill-humour; bear him a child if such were his wish, and never criticize his improprieties of conduct. Uncle Larry could get as drunk as a lord, run about the house with his braces undone, belch like an old general and scratch himself all over like a monkey in a cage—Kiwi made no protest. Larry had bought her, and therefore had the right to behave in her presence like a hog.

But his rough behaviour was less palatable to Magali and Claudette. Claudette had complained to her mother:

"Mother, I'm not a prude. I've attended Red Cross lectures in Saigon. But really, Uncle Larry's manners would disgust Madame Sans-Gêne. Yesterday I saw him doing a nudist act, stretched out on the lawn in the sunshine, close to Kiwi's tent. I looked away as I passed so as not to embarrass him. But *he* had the cheek to call out to *me*, 'Hullo, Claudette; I'm no Tarzan, I know, but there's *more* of me.'"

That morning Magali was in very good humour. For the first time since their arrival she wore a happy look on her face. She felt indulgent towards her brother-in-law, and answered:

"Well, child, what's it matter, anyway? We must be patient with our old friend. Don't forget that he's our only means of approach to the *beau monde* of Shanghai. We must forgive his little weaknesses."

The servant knocked on the door and entered, bowing:

"Missi Obson; Master wants talkie-talkie with you. He's waiting in his room. Come quick."

"Tell him I'll be right there."

"Can do, Missi Obson."

The Chinaman retired. Magali had on a flowered silk dress. She powdered her face in the glass, and as she went out, said:

"What would you say, Claudette, if next week we were invited to a big ball in Boris's house?"

"Why should you imagine any such thing, Mother?"

"I read this week's gossip column in the *China Herald*. Apparently the whole of Shanghai is going."

Magali tripped downstairs in a gay mood, filled with pleasant anticipations. She knocked at the door of Uncle Larry's room and went in. He was still in bed, his pyjama jacket undone,

revealing a hairy chest. Kiwi was sitting at the edge of the bed, manicuring his nails. Larry welcomed his sister-in-law.

"Come in, come in, my dear, and excuse my appearance. You're now witnessing the 'Petit Lever du Roi.' Kiwi's finished her job at last. I'm becoming a dandy in my old age. She insists on cleaning up my paws. It amuses her. . . . Sit down, Magali, I want to talk to you." He examined his hands. "That'll do, Kiwi. Run along now and tell Li I shall want the car at eleven."

Kiwi bowed to her sister-in-law and went out. Uncle Larry lay on his side on the *chaise-longue* like a fat courtesan.

"Tell me, sister dear, are you getting acclimatized to your life in Shanghai?"

"Yes, indeed, Larry. Claudette is fascinated by the town—it's much more hybrid than Saigon or Hanoi. In spite of the Japanese occupation, one feels that it's still a town of great possibilities."

"I'm glad you feel that."

"I do, Larry. And I am sure that you and Claudette and I, in league together, are going to achieve great things. I'm sure that you're too humble about yourself; your connection with Boris will be a great help to us."

"Why shouldn't it? Incidentally, have you any ideas about getting employment?"

"Heavens no. I haven't had time even to start looking around."

"Of course you haven't. Remember, there's no hurry. But if you've nothing in mind, I can tell you that an idea has occurred to me by which you could earn an honest living."

Magali's interest was aroused at once. She repeated:

"Earn an honest living?"

Larry bit the end off his morning cigar, lit it, and, blowing the smoke towards the ceiling, said slowly:

"Magali, I've got a job for you."

The word "job" rang unpleasantly in Magali's ears; it sounded even worse than if he'd said, "I've got a situation for you as a housemaid."

"This is the idea," said Larry. "You probably realize that I do very little navigation any more. If Boris ever needs me to help with the delivery of some cargo or other, then I take command of a boat, and get back to my old job, compass in hand, poring over the nautical maps of the China coast-line. But lately Boris has been employing me chiefly on shore. He trusts me. For the last fifteen years I've been honest in my dealings with him. No racketeering, no cornering of markets, no illicit traffick-ing. Oh no—I've always been straight with Boris. As a reward, he's just offered me a sinecure—the management of a night-club which he's bought and wants to reopen on a grand scale."

"Count Stolitzine proprietor of a night-club?"

"In a discreet fashion, yes. Why not? Boris has interests in concerns of every kind; munitions, opium, machine-guns, vitamins, house property, manganese mines, navigation and night-clubs. Wherever there's a profit to be made, you'll find Boris's hand in it. If one could engage seats in Paradise, Boris would be the leading Times Square agent for the 'Blessed Throng' pressing at the gates. However, as I was saying, Boris has bought the *Topaze*; it's a night-club in Bubbling Wells Road. He's entrusted the management of it to Mario Ercole, an Italian, who supervises the bar and the dance-hall. But, as I suppose you realize, the manager of a night-club is subjected to temptations which Saint Anthony himself would have found difficult to resist. So Boris has given *me* the job of supervising Ercole. So you see I've got a certain say in the running of the *Topaze*. And this has given me an idea."

Magali had been listening with an ever-increasing sense of uneasiness. She did not dare to interrupt Uncle Larry, who chattered away with the usual bonhomie of an old cynic. Uncle Larry, with a cigar hanging out of the corner of his mouth, his right hand busily engaged in scratching the hairs of his chest, bent over to his sister-in-law, and, as though he were offering her the whole of Peru on a platter, whispered:

"Magali, what would you say if I offered you the post of *Captain of the taxi-girls at the Topaze?*"

Magali made no reply for the simple reason that her throat was literally contracted with horror. She could not even utter any exclamation of protest—her hands waved feebly in the air. The idea of Mrs. Magali Hobson, honoured and respected in Saigon, invited with her daughter to Government House, who had come to Shanghai with the laudable intention of moving in official and diplomatic circles; Magali Hobson, daughter of an Inspector-General of Customs, grand-daughter of a district tax-collector, sinking to the level of a *taxi-girl captain at the Topaze!* It was outrageous—more than outrageous—it was comical—one of those music-hall jokes which amuse simple people.

Uncle Larry, watching his sister-in-law's face, saw that his grand scheme had fallen flat. He looked a bit crestfallen, and said: "You don't seem very thrilled at the prospect."

Magali's voice still failed her. She who was usually first off the mark with her retorts, who reacted like lightning to the slightest stimulus, was now so cast down that she could not utter a word. Eventually she rose unsteadily to her feet, and in an ice-cold voice which concealed her growing anger, said:

"Larry, if you're trying to be witty, then your wit lacks flavour."

If, on the other hand, you're serious, then you're not only very inconsiderate, you're unkind and insulting. Please excuse me, I'm going."

Uncle Larry, amazed, brandished his cigar in the air:

"Where on earth are you going, Magali?"

"I am going to my room."

"Wait, Magali, wait! God in heaven, don't get on your high horse before I've even had time to explain the thing to you."

"Larry, there's nothing you can add to your insulting offer."

"God, you're stupid! Just listen for a moment, and don't act like a duchess who's had her bottom pinched in a ball-room. Don't you realize that the *Topaze* is the smartest night-club in the town? If you think it's a sort of low joint for sailors and their girls in the Sou-Chow Creek district, then you're on the wrong tack. You want to make social contacts—well here's your chance. Do you imagine that Boris would finance any place that wasn't beyond reproach? In my opinion it's a unique opportunity which you should make the most of. . . . It's an easy job, pleasant and unobtrusive. Nobody's going to ask you to dance the French Cancan on a tight-rope."

"Oh, indeed?"

"No. You'll be in charge of the *taxi-girls*—that's all. Like being overseer of a gang of workmen."

"Oh, indeed?"

"I can't see much difference between that and selling dresses in a dress-shop!"

"Oh, you see no difference?"

Magali, who was already making her way towards the door, now turned and gave Larry a haughty stare. She controlled herself sufficiently to say gently:

"Well, Larry, if you don't see the difference, I won't trouble you any more. I'm leaving."

"Where are you going, Magali?"

Magali did not condescend to answer. Gathering up the skirt of her long-flowing *négligée* she left the room in a manner worthy of Athelia before the footlights of the *Comédie Française*.



Claudette was lying on her back day-dreaming when her mother returned to the bedroom. Without looking round she asked mischievously:

"Well, Mother? Did Uncle Larry get us an invitation to the Grand Mogul's fête?"

No answer was forthcoming, so Claudette was obliged to lift her head from the pillow. She was astounded to see her mother collapse on to the bed and burst into convulsive sobs. Claudette rushed over to her side, and tried to comfort her.

"Mother, Mother, what's the matter? What's happened? Are you ill? Please answer me. Tell me what it is. You're upsetting me."

Magali's strangled voice emerged from the pillows.

"Poor darling child! It's terrible! How could he do such a thing to me! Your Uncle Larry, your own father's brother! Fancy even suggesting such a thing!"

Claudette, knowing her mother so well, felt easier. There had probably been a row between her and Uncle Larry, nothing more.

"You and Uncle Larry have had a quarrel?"

"Oh God, if it had only been a quarrel! He actually *insulted* me. He insulted your mother! Ooooooooooh!"

Magali started moaning again. Claudette tried to calm her like a nervous child. *She* was now the mother, and Magali the daughter.

"Mother, darling, please, *please* don't get into such a state. It can't be so dreadful as all that. How do you mean he insulted you?"

Magali at last looked up, her face in a mess, tears running down her cheeks. She blew her nose violently, tore her handkerchief into shreds, and finally spoke out:

"I'm going to tell you what Uncle Larry had the cheek to propose to me. He offered me the post of *Captain of the taxi-girls* at the *Topaze*!"

The absurdity of the idea struck Claudette so forcibly that she burst into a loud peal of laughter. She could not take the matter as seriously as her mother.

"You who are so fond of uniforms, Mother!"

"But don't you understand, child? Offering your mother a position like that! Do you think I could do such a thing? It's mad! It's preposterous! If you'd heard the way he spoke, you'd have thought he was offering me a position as lady-in-waiting to the Queen of England."

"What is this *Topaze*?"

"It's a night-club in Bubbling Wells Road."

"How does Uncle Larry know about this *Topaze*?"

"Because it's one of Boris's secret business concerns, and Larry watches his interests there."

"Oh, now I understand."

Magali was no longer in tears. Rage had gained the upper hand. Like a tidal wave she returned to the attack, powerful, sweeping, devastating. Sorrow gave place suddenly to anger.

"Claudette," she said, "listen to me. You don't seem to understand. Your father's own brother had the infernal cheek to suggest that I, his sister-in-law, should become the watch-dog of a lot of *taxi-girls* in a low night-club, a haunt of all the gigolos in Shanghai. If you read that in a novel, you'd think the author had suddenly gone mad. Unfortunately it isn't a novel. The man who should be protecting us, spoiling us, sheltering us from the world, offers us instead degradation, abasement, the gutter. Can you see me, Magali Hobson, acting as the *duenna* of ten prostitutes at ten cents a dance."

In her rage Magali's voice rose higher and higher; she was now shouting at top-pitch, as though haranguing an audience of five hundred people. "My worthy brother-in-law wants me to earn my bread in Shanghai! Why not as a procuress or a white-slave trafficker? Or as the *patronne* of a brothel? There's no limit to some people's selfishness. Having entertained us for a week, he's now beginning to regret the expense. That Kiwi of his has obviously been working him up against us. Very well then, if that's the case, I shan't stay one more day in this shanty. We'll leave, Claudette. We'll go somewhere else."

"Where shall we go, Mother?"

"Somewhere, anywhere! Thank God I'm not yet a complete pauper."

"Don't forget that it's five months before we get our next cheque from the company."

"Well, what about it? I'd rather beg my bread in the Avenue Joffre than . . . er . . ."

Magali was pacing up and down like a lioness in a cage. Claudette walked slowly to the bathroom. She spoke in a very calm voice.

"Mother, I'm going to have a bath. Think it over, darling. If you really want to leave, we'd better start packing our luggage at once."

Claudette went out. Magali continued pacing to and fro, but with diminishing speed. The tidal wave was losing its impetus, the great onrush of water had spent itself and was receding little by little. At last Magali lay down on her bed, her eyes staring at the ceiling. She began to ponder.

Claudette came in dressed, and found her mother still in a prone position, apparently deep in thought.

"Well," she said, "are we still going away?"

"Leave me to think, child."

"Very well, Mother. It's now midday. I'm going for a short walk in the Rue du Consulat. I shall be back at one o'clock, in time for lunch."

Magali, left alone, pursued her thoughts quietly and sensibly.

It was characteristic of her to burst out into a violent rage and then cool down again into sane and logical thinking. The important thing was to assess Uncle Larry's proposal clearly, to measure its redeeming points against its horrors, if indeed there *were* any redeeming points. Magali had an hour in which to perform this dissecting operation.

What was the principal object of her journey to Shanghai? To ensure a splendid marriage for Claudette. Everything should be sacrificed to this end. Moreover, Boris was the obvious person for Claudette to meet—it was only among his circle of friends that she would find a suitable, rich and kind young man with whom to fall in love. Magali, having no personal friends in Shanghai, had only one means of entry into Boris's house—namely through Uncle Larry. Unfortunately, Larry, the untidy old ruffian, was never invited to Boris's fashionable parties; he could, however, bring Boris and Magali together on neutral ground, namely, at the *Topaze*. Having arrived so far in her meditations, Magali put the question brutally to herself:

"Could I, without losing all self-respect, become *Captain* of the *taxi-girls*?"

Instinctively, even in the silence of her room, and in her present reasonable state of mind, Magali's soul revolted at the idea and she shouted aloud, "No."

Each human problem can be interpreted in a hundred different ways, according to the manner in which the problem is approached.

One can argue oneself out of everything in this world. Magali argued intellectually that a smart night-club was not a public bar. A *taxi-girl* was not a prostitute. A *Captain* of *taxi-girls* was a woman who, in an honourable manner, supervised a troupe of professional dancers who sold their dance-steps for so much a minute. Dancing in a night-club was no more shocking than dancing in a Park Avenue drawing-room.

By merely chaperoning a team of dancers, she would not be acting illegally, nor indeed immorally. Her action could even be termed virtuous in the sense that she would be influencing her pupils, in the intervals of work, to resist the temptations that beset them on all sides.

Arguing thus bit by bit, Magali was finally able to put this question to herself:

"Mrs. Magali Hobson, *née* Mérillac, can you, or can you not, accept Uncle Larry's offer?"

Her subconscious mind, her traditions, her bourgeois origin at first revolted, and whispered in chorus: "Impossible!" Then opportunism spoke up, and whispered, "Why impossible? After

all no one knows you in Shanghai. Your friends and relations are in France and at Saïgon. Any temporary job you undertake in Shanghai will not affect your permanent position in Marseilles."

Her thoughts having led her, step by step, to the possibility of accepting the offer, she now began to consider its advantages:

The weekly salary was not of great importance; the main thing was to consider what Claudette might achieve from her mother's connection with the *Topaze*. At least she would meet an interesting set of people. A popular night-club was a gold-mine for anyone who knew how to profit by it. Obviously rich people would come there to buy champagne at forty dollars a bottle. It was even possible—heavenly thought—that the great Boris himself might occasionally visit his own night-club. Magali, with a little exercise of cunning, might attract his attention and gain his sympathy. Naturally it would be better if she were sponsored by the French Ambassadress, but, *faute de mieux*, she must be content with the tradesmen's entrance which Larry offered her.

At a quarter-past one, Claudette returned. Her mother was still lying on the bed. Claudette came up to her, stroked her forehead affectionately, and said:

"Well, Mother, have you started packing?"

Magali put her arms round Claudette's waist and drew her towards her, looking her fixedly in the eyes. She was now calm and resolved.

"We're staying on, darling."

She drew her daughter's hand down to her lips and kissed it with a mother's devotion. Claudette was amazed at this unwonted exhibition of calm.

"Claudette," said Magali in a serious voice, "I've decided to accept Uncle Larry's offer. I've thought it all out very carefully. I think, in spite of the vulgarity of it all, that it will be the best thing for your future."

"Mother, I don't want you to sacrifice yourself to this extent, merely in the hope that I may gain some personal advantage from it."

"Nonsense, Claudette—you're a darling, and I love you for thinking of me; but it's useless to protest, and I'll tell you why: because there's nothing I wouldn't do to make you happy, to help you attain what you deserve in this world, in other words, the highest place. Claudette, on your father's grave I swear that if need be I'll walk barefoot in the mud, I'd steal, I'd commit murder . . ."

Magali hugged her daughter to her in a sudden gust of emotion, as though to impress her sincerity upon Claudette more strongly than by mere words. Her voice was hoarse as she murmured:

"You understand, Claudette, darling child. I'll do anything

for you—anything. I'll spare no effort; there's nothing I won't endure. I want you to have everything that I've missed in life. Claudette, you're the only thing I care for in this world, and I swear to God that I'll make you happy and successful, even if it means my death."

Claudette was quite overcome by the note of passion in her mother's voice. She hugged her close, and they kissed again and again. Together, it seemed, they would master the adversities of Fate.

There was a sudden knock.

"Who's there?"

Li's voice sounded from the other side of the door.

"Missi Obson . . . Master asks if he is to expect the ladies for lunch."

"Tell Master we'll be down in two minutes," said Magali.

"Can do, Missi Obson."

Magali dressed hurriedly and found Uncle Larry eating his *hors-d'œuvre* in the dining-room. Surprised at the placid look on his sister-in-law's face, he cried:

"Hullo, Magali! Lo and behold, the Duchess is smiling again!"

Magali said in a quick undertone:

"Larry, a word in your ear before Claudette comes down. We'll discuss your proposal *tête-à-tête* after lunch. I'd rather my daughter knew nothing of the matter."

"Okay, my dear, just as you please."

Uncle Larry was delighted at Magali's change of front. He went over to Mephisto and offered him a salted almond, upon which the ape rushed out with the bell to Kiwi's tent to announce lunch. In the studio next door, Rasputin the parrot, hearing the bell, began screaming a chorus in confirmation of the fact that—

"Dinner is served! Mama mia! *Couche! couche!*"

V

THE *Topaze* in Bubbling Wells Road, situated near the race-course, was the most fashionable night-club in Shanghai. It was decorated in a style semi-Chinese, semi-European. The bar was a replica of the bar at Maxim's; the band was first class, and the *taxi-girls* more than usually seductive.

These fifteen creatures, on hire as partners for 10 cents a dance, represented the League of Nations in evening dress. Seven of them were Russian, three Poles, two Italians, one French, one American and one German. They were not all of classic beauty, but each had her own peculiar charm. They were all dressed alike, in black, with a triangular *décolleté*, and each wore the same smile, the smile of an obliging greengrocer—"Anything else I can do for you, madame?" They performed their nightly ritual with the perfection of professionals who had long ceased to listen to the rhythm of the music, who took no interest in their partners and gave the same stereotyped replies to the same stupid questions. Each one appeared to be dancing with an invisible man. At the end of each dance they slipped their tickets into their bags, smiled at their clients and went obediently to their seats to await the next customer. These robots of industrialized choreography only became human when they retired to their dressing-room. They hung up their black *décolleté* dresses, put on their ordinary clothes, and counted up their earnings for the night. Then one would go home to her husband, a policeman in the French Concession, and cook him his dinner like a good housewife; another would go to meet the man she loved. The rest would proceed home to work out their monthly accounts.

Their boss was Mario Ercole, the manager, who, like a mediaeval lord of the manor, exercised a sort of *droit du seigneur* over his subjects. No girl could get a job as a dancing partner at the *Topaze* without first passing through Mario's private cubicle. Mario sampled them like a taster of rare wines. That was the only obligation they had to endure. They need not subscribe to any *pool*; they paid merely by their gracious presence in the *love nest*, as Mario chose to call his little office. Once he had stamped the candidate, she was handed over to Mrs. Hobson, who thenceforth became her immediate superior. Mario would summon Magali, and introduce her to the *new girl*: "Mrs. Hobson, this is Nadia. She's to take the place of Marianne, who has left for Hongkong." Then turning to the *new girl*, he would say, "Mrs. Hobson is your captain. She's responsible for your good behaviour, and you must obey her orders. She will see that you are correctly dressed, and will instruct you in the rules of the house. I must warn you that our clients are to be treated with respect—no little games under the table-cloth. Talking to clients is not allowed except in the bar, between dances. You will receive fifteen per cent. of the money taken at the bar. Every week the girl who cashes in the most tickets receives a bonus of ten dollars. That is all." And M. Mario, who a few minutes earlier had been clasping the new candidate

in a herculean embrace, bowed politely and dismissed her with a curt "*Bonsoir Mademoiselle.*"

Fifteen *lovelies* at ten cents a dance. Magali had been supervising them for the last ten days. She had swallowed her pride. Having crossed the Rubicon, she accepted her fate with the calm resolve of a woman who knows what she is about, and what she hopes to gain by it. The most astonished and delighted person was Uncle Larry, who rejoiced to see Magali intent on earning her own living.

Every evening at 7 o'clock, Magali arrived at the *Topaze*, and remained there till 3 in the morning. She enforced good behaviour among the girls, and saw that their dresses were neat and tidy—in short, for eight hours a day, she played the rôle of sheep-dog. She never entered the ballroom, but sat at a table in a quiet corner of the bar, and watched everything from there. She needed for her task the wisdom of Solomon and the authority of Pentheliseia; she had to prevent conflicts and quell storms of jealousy and rage which frequently arose among her band of protégées. The seven Russians, Olga, Nadia, Ludmilla, Anna, Vera, Maria and Sandra kept themselves aloof from the rest. They were all Countesses, daughters of Russian exiles, who had been born during the turmoil of the Revolution. Left to themselves in a foreign land, they had acquired the drooping appearance of a flock of sea-gulls, driven by storms on to a barren rock. The only French girl, Thérèse Marcheux, was an actress who had once won a diploma at the Paris Conservatoire, had come to Indo-China in the hopes of making a fortune, had been sacked from a Saigon theatrical touring company, deserted and robbed in Indo-China by a crooked Impresario, was now a poor doll-faced creature with forget-me-not eyes, resigned to all idea of playing soubrette parts, and earning a modest pittance in Shanghai. All that remained to her of her original triumphs was a large trunk filled with old numbers of *l'Illustration*, and faded theatrical scripts with her *cues* underlined in red ink. Hesitating between a lingering death and a nightly performance of the tango, she had chosen *Frénésie* in preference to the funeral march of *Götterdämmerung*.

Clara Dickerhoff, the German girl, was the most docile of the lot. Directly she was free, she would go off and spend her earnings gobbling up the lavish meals served in a neighbouring Chinese restaurant. Chinese food was not so much to her taste as *Gänsebraten* and *Apfeltorte*, but it was the best she could find.

The three Poles, Mara, Anielka and Paula, adopted a hostile attitude towards the Russian gang. They were Volhynian

peasants or working-class girls from the neighbourhood of Lwow, and their chief amusement was shocking the Russian Countesses by the crudity of their language. They joined in scorn of the aristocracy with the two Italians, Nedda and Francesca, two lovely Titian-haired girls from Piedmont.

But the real *character* among the dancers was Ruby. Everyone in Bubbling Wells Road knew Ruby McDougall. All the night-birds of the settlement wondered what series of misfortunes could have brought to Shanghai this high-spirited girl, as free in her manners and coarse in her language as a dock-hand, as sentimental as an old spinster, and as generous as "Saint-Martin." Magali had at once taken to Ruby, and Ruby to her.

"Mrs. Hobson," she said, "in spite of your name I bet you weren't born between New York and 'Frisco. You're a swell girl all the same, and if I can ever do you a favour let me know. For five years now I've been leading a bitch of a life in this unhappy town. I'm just a lousy old tart—yes, pretty regularly—a *navy wife*. My husband was quarter-master on the cruiser *Memphis*. He left me in Manilla for a Philippine woman who smelt of coconut and goat's milk. So then I landed here. After two years I thought I was in for a break. I'd fallen in with a pimp with pots of money, a fur-trader. He wasn't very handsome—he'd a hare-lip; he wasn't even very honest—he'd done three years in Holloway for petty thieving. But there, I thought, one can't have everything, a mink coat *and* a Pope's Chamberlain. Alas, my marriage came to bits."

Magali cried out in sympathy:

"Poor Ruby, why?"

"For a reason you'll never guess. Just imagine, on the eve of our wedding, he came into my room and said point-blank, 'Ruby, we're to be married to-morrow. I don't want you to think you're marrying a dud. So I'm going to strip, and you must tell me frankly what you think of me!' In a flash he threw off his clothes and stood before me naked as a new-born babe. What would you've done, Mrs. Hobson? Personally, I just clasped my hands together in admiration, and cried out, 'God, you're a handsome well-built chap, Herbert!' Well, my politeness was my undoing. Herbert came close up to me, stark naked mind you, and flung out at me in a tone of bitter irony: 'Me, well-built? With this hanging paunch, these bottle-neck shoulders, this little pigeon chest and these great stupid-looking feet? Either you're a fool or you're a liar, and as I'm not marrying a stupid woman or a gold-digger, you can go to hell.' Whereupon he turned round, put on his clothes and left. I never saw him again. And that, Mrs. Hobson,

is the reason why I come here every evening and wear myself to the bone to earn food, bed and lodging."



At three in the morning, after the club had closed and her troupe had gone their various ways into the darkness of the town, Magali would return to the Amoy Road. Claudette would wake up to find her mother undressing, and reproach herself inwardly for allowing her to work. Every time she saw Magali going to bed, worn with fatigue, she would say:

"Darling Mother, I'm so terribly ashamed to think of you working yourself to death in that club while I do nothing at all."

"Don't be silly, child," said Magali, as she arranged her pillows. "I've told you a thousand times. I know quite well how to deal with Mario Ercole's various whims. To-night he tried out so many *taxi-girl* candidates that he was holding on to the bar in a state of complete stupor. No, Claudette, I'm right in keeping you under lock and key in Uncle Larry's house. No one knows you yet in Shanghai—they're not even aware of your existence. You're a trump card that I'll bring out at a suitable moment. So don't worry, darling. I'm working for you and for myself, for the two Hobson girls. As Paul Gerald would say, I'm building up a future for *Toi-z-et Moi*."

Magali wasn't telling lies. She had her plans well worked out.

One evening she was obliged to arbitrate in a dispute between one of the blonde Russian Countesses and the Polish girl, Anielka. Anielka, by low-down methods, had lured away from the Countess an important client who usually danced ten tangos with her. She had threatened the client—a bank-director—that unless he gave her 25 tickets, she would telephone his wife that he was on the razzle at the *Topaze* and not, as the wife imagined, discussing the Batavian sugar market with his business friends. The banker was petrified, did what the Polish girl demanded, and thus deprived the Countess of six beautiful tangos. Magali had forced the Polish girl to give half the profits of her blackmailing tactics to the Russian, but had not yet succeeded in pacifying the two squabbling creatures when Uncle Larry suddenly appeared upon the scene.

Larry was half drunk, and signalled to Magali that he wished to talk to her. They met discreetly in one of the passages. Uncle Larry, in a filthy old hat and crumpled trousers, his nose all red and bulbous, whispered to Magali:

"To-night you're going to get your wish."

"What do you mean, Larry?"

"You're going to meet Boris. There's a treat in store for you! Oh boy, my sister-in-law to feast her eyes on the beautiful Boris! Just think!—the illustrious Count exchanging words with the *taxi-girl Captain!*"

Magali was irritated by her brother-in-law's manner. She asked impatiently:

"Doesn't he know that we're related?"

"No. He knows no more than Ercole knows. It doesn't concern them."

"Very well, I prefer it that way. But why am I to be so honoured all of a sudden?"

"Because he rang me to say he wanted to meet the *taxi-girl Captain.*"

At about half-past twelve, Boris came in.

Magali, sitting at her table, guessed at once that it was he. She watched him with intense interest as he slowly advanced into the room. Count Boris Alexandrovitch Stolitzone was not a man who could enter a room without attracting attention. The first thing one noticed about him were his brilliant dark-ringed eyes and his thick, bushy eyebrows. He had the aquiline nose of an ancient Roman accidentally born in the Russian steppes, and a young, supple figure in no way betraying his age, which was forty-three.

This last remaining member of the Stolitzones was the descendant of a family who had scrawled their names in the margin of Russian history. Their importance dated from the middle of the eighteenth century, when Catherine the Great had made herself Czarina. Cyril Stolitzone, at that time captain in the Preobrajensky regiment, had been one of the first to cry out with Prince Menschikoff, "Long live our little mother Catherine!" during the crises of her husband's death and her own accession. Ennobled for his loyalty to the new sovereign, the young and attractive officer was destined in later years to become a frequent visitor to the Imperial bed-chamber. Cyril became a favourite at Court, and died rich and respected, bequeathing to the future generations of Stolitzones an historic name, acquired at one of the most dramatic moments in Russian history.

Throughout the Nineteenth Century, the name of Stolitzone was to be found associated with the heroes of fateful duels fought in the romantic era of Pushkin, with Vice-Governors of Caucasia, aides-de-camp of Alexander III, officers at the headquarters of Kouropatkin in Manchuria, mentioned in despatches for gallantry in the field.

In subsequent generations the name of Stolitzone was to be found in the annals of the Russian navy, in the Diplomatic Corps,

and even in the stormy ranks of the Nihilist Party. A certain Nicholas Stolitzine, a naval captain, had audaciously suggested to Admiral Avellan, Chief of the Russian naval delegation in Paris, that he should hoist the Imperial Standard and the French tricolour flag on the balcony of the French Military club in the Place de l'Opera. Another, Serge Stolitzine, Counsellor at the Russian Embassy in Belgrade, had been implicated in the plot to assassinate Queen Draga Maschin in one of those many Ruritanian scenes of which the Balkan Provinces appear to have the monopoly. One renegade member of the family, a revolutionary, Ivan Stolitzine, had scorned Imperial favours, and had gone to Switzerland to put his expert chemical knowledge at the disposal of Lenin, before the fateful day of the sealed carriage incident.

Then had come the Russian Revolution, and the extinction of the race of Emperors and Grand Dukes; the murder of old Count Vladimir Stolitzine in the Castle of Peter and Paul—the violation and execution of the Countess on her estate near Kiev, and the flight of their young son Boris, at that time a lieutenant in a regiment of demobilized dragoons, who had narrowly escaped being executed at the hands of his superior officers.

Boris's adventures between the years 1920 and 1939 would have been the joy of any journalist in search of copy. The first years had been exile, cold and starvation in Harbin; a first glimmer of sunshine had come to him in Tientsin, with ups and downs of luck—one day he was technical adviser to a rebel Chinese general, the next a guide for tourists visiting the Great Wall; one year living like a mandarin in a most palatial "Yamen" in Hong-Kong, the next unable even to pay his rent in a garret in the Shameen concession.

Grand Seigneur that he was, with a rare knowledge of the human soul, he was destined in the end to master circumstances. In 1929 he had acquired his first million taels. From then on good fortune never left him. In ten years he had become one of the most remarkable personalities of the Far East, better-informed than any ambassador, more powerful than any provincial Governor, more cunning than his compatriot Platon Zubov, and bolder than any tight-rope dancer.

He had married in 1926, when he was still poor, a Russian companion in exile, a sad, blue-eyed, humble-minded creature who responded eagerly to the magnetism of his personality. He soon wearied of her gentle, docile ways, and forced her to divorce him. But with his usual generosity he gave her all his money, three thousand dollars, and bade her never think any more of him as a living person. When they parted outside the door of the bank, he said, "Now, my dear, as far as you're concerned, I'm dead. You

will no longer bear my name. You'll forget that I have ever held you in my arms. Here are three thousand dollars for you, and please go to some other continent. Personally I've no money left at all. To-morrow I shall go and beg a meal from a friend. Adieu" . . . And the poor, sad, pitiful girl gazed longingly after Boris, that fantastic creature who had ordered her out of his life as a gourmet might order a waiter to bring him an *entrecôte* done to a turn.



Boris exchanged a few words with Mario Ercole and Larry. Ercole, with an obsequious smile, handed him an account of the takings of the club. Larry kept trying to talk, but was too drunk to finish his sentences. Boris tapped him on the shoulder.

"Larry, go home. You're as drunk as a squadron of cossacks after a night's looting. Mario will introduce me to the *taxi-girl Captain*. You clear off."

Boris advanced towards Magali's table. Mario whispered to her: "Here's the proprietor. Get up, quick." Magali hesitated. Boris signed to her to remain seated, waved the manager away, and began talking to Magali with the complete nonchalance of a man who is equally at ease with a queen or a farmer's wife.

"Mrs. Hobson, I wanted to see you because I need your assistance."

"I shall be very pleased to be of use to you, Count Stolitine."

"Here's the point. I'm giving a dinner at my house on Friday next—a birthday dinner for my friend and business partner, Paolo Borgia. We shall be a party of eleven, six men and five women—a bachelor's party, to which only lady friends are admitted. I need a member of the opposite sex for Paolo Borgia, and I want to surprise him by providing a charming woman to sit next to him. But please understand, Mrs. Hobson. I don't know if you know about me, but I must tell you that my house in the Avenue Joffre is no monastery. My business evenings are frigid, but my bachelor parties are gay. Not that they degenerate into obscene orgies. So I don't want you to send me a *taxi-girl* whose one idea is to undress between the *foie-gras* and the *pêche* Melba. No indeed. Can you think of any pretty young woman, well brought up, yet not too stand-offish, who could possibly fill the bill?"

Magali had been listening to Boris, her heart beating with excitement. She was entirely won over by his charm, which combined the sting of a knout's lash with the firmness of a Toledo sword-blade. He was standing facing her at an angle of three-quarters. His clean-shaven mouth and jaw showed obstinacy and

determination. His hands were slender, his shoulders broad and muscular. The Russian inflexion of his speech added charm to his faultless French. He wore an air of graceful cynicism, a cynicism which twenty years of struggling in the Far East had only aggravated, and which, like a diver's dress, protected him against any excess of enthusiasm or credulity.

Boris's proposal was the spark which suddenly kindled Magali's imagination. In two seconds her mind had already constructed a scenario worthy of the best architects in any Hollywood studio. Boris continued:

"I came to you for assistance, Mrs. Hobson, because I thought that you would probably be able to suggest someone entirely outside our own little circle of friends. I know a dozen girls who would have jumped at the invitation. But I wanted to give Paolo a pleasant surprise."

"I know someone who would do admirably for you in every way. A young widow, the Baroness de Mauchamp."

"French?"

"Yes. She's just arrived from Pnom Penh, where her late husband was Administrator."

"Is she young?"

"Eighteen."

"Pretty?"

"I think your friend will be enchanted by her. But as far as I know, she's not the kind who'll allow herself to be played about with. She's a person who can look after herself."

"That's excellent, Mrs. Hobson. Will you then be so kind as to convey my invitation to the Baroness de Mauchamp. Friday next at eight o'clock. Number 2355, Avenue Joffre."

Boris was silent, and stared at Magali. Till that moment he had not paid much attention to her. He only vaguely remembered Larry's recommendation. Suddenly he took notice of her, and saw that she was obviously superior to the position she occupied. She was no sordid tart for whom every man is a potential money-bag, nor yet a banal procuress who measures out sexual gratification by the yard like ribbon. His interest in her increased as he noticed her perfect manners and the look of intelligence in her eyes. At first he had intended to slip her a ten-dollar bill under the counter. He refrained.

"Before leaving you, Mrs. Hobson," he said, "I would like to congratulate you on the ability with which you have carried out your duties at the *Topaze*. Mario has sung your praises to me most highly."

"Count Stolitzine, with a little intelligence a woman can do anything, however foreign to her nature."

Boris nodded.

"Oh, I see; the usual story of the ups and downs of fate. That's a thing we've all had to endure, Mrs. Hobson."

"Precisely. But I regret nothing, I assure you. For me life is a long string of to-morrows."

"Yes, you're right. One always hopes that some day Fortune will smile upon one!"



At three in the morning Magali rushed home. She was thrilled, and longed to waken Claudette. She found her lying awake. Magali sat down on the edge of her bed, and told her the exciting news.

"Darling, what would you say if I told you that I'd got an invitation for you to dine next Friday with Count Stolitine?"

"I should say it was a miracle."

"Well, the miracle has happened to-night, thanks to your Mother."

"It's an invitation for us both, of course?"

"No, for you alone. Look happy, child! You've broken at last into the magic circle. At last I'm to be rewarded for my labours."

"But I don't understand, Mother. Why am I invited without you?"

Magali, with shining eyes excitedly related her encounter with Boris. Claudette looked rather crestfallen.

"Well, darling, it can't be helped," said Magali, understanding her daughter's feelings. "I couldn't let such a marvellous opportunity go by. It's true that you're entering Shanghai society under a false name. It's true that you're only going to lend attraction to a bachelor party. Of course I'd much rather you'd been introduced to Boris in different circumstances. But for want of a better way . . ."

"So I understand that I'm going in order to be Paolo Borgia's partner. And how about Boris?"

"That part's easy, darling. If Boris's friend likes you, then Boris is bound to take a greater interest in you himself. Even the most successful man covets his neighbour's possessions. That's a truism which no Freudian subtleties have ever altered. Claudette, darling child, make yourself really lovely next Friday. That evening your future will be decided for better or worse."

Claudette was now wide awake. She was beginning to understand the significance of this adventure. Her mother's brazenness, which had at first rather horrified her, no longer seemed quite so dreadful.

She threw back her head triumphantly.

"Very well, I'm to be the Baroness de Mauchamp, the young and attractive widow of one of the administrators of Pnom Penh. And I'm to tell my sorrows to a ridiculous creature called Borgia. It's really going to be a most absurd episode, Mother."

"Well, laugh if you like, child. Meanwhile, trust to your old mother's experience. One evening you dine with a man, and a month hence you'll find yourself standing before the altar. Claudette, do you realize that you're going to have the chance in one evening of meeting half a dozen of the richest bachelors in Shanghai?"

"Yes, but there's a hitch—my false identity. If I were to inspire a serious sentiment in one of them he'd never forgive me for masquerading."

"When a man's in love, he pays no attention to the label round the neck of his adored one."

"Tell me, Mother, what dress shall I wear? My blue or my black dress?"

"Don't worry about that now. We'll have a rehearsal before the time comes."

"What exactly is he like, this Count Stolitzine?"

Mother and daughter gossiped till four in the morning. Claudette, leaning against the back of the bed, with her arms clasped around her knees, listened to her mother, whose vivid description brought everything to life. The Count, the mysterious Borgia, the gorgeous house in the Avenue Joffre, Boris's past life, his fascinating personality, his eyes, everything appeared more lively as Magali described it.

Claudette, intoxicated by her mother's eloquence, careered away with her on the white horse of dreams, that fantastic animal whose outspread wings carried them both towards a distant blue horizon, where Happiness awaited them in a top hat and a flowered button-hole.

VI

BORIS STOLITZINE'S offices were on the quayside, close to the French Consulate. There Boris and his partner, Paolo Borgia, carried on their various secret financial activities, of which the shadiest seemed to bring in the most profit. This Russo-Italian

combination traded in everything—metals, food supplies, firearms, munitions, electric equipment and opium. Their profits in the opium trade were enormous—it seemed that the more people smoked the less they bargained.

These two men, Stolitzine and Borgia, had first become acquainted over the opium racket. They had understood each other at once, and with great acumen, decided to join forces rather than to compete; they believed in the motto "Union is strength." It couldn't be said that they loved each other with a deep, passionate attachment, but their attitude towards the world was similar. They both liked champagne, pretty women and a gay life. Every evening at five o'clock they would lock away their business affairs and set off in search of relaxation, which took the form of visiting closed houses, attempting new "conquests," liquidating old ones, and, like two foxes, prowling about in search of happy conjugal hencoops which they might disturb.

This partnership of the two Casanovas was the main topic of conversation among the *habitués* of the International Bar. For many years past the Boris-Paolo tandem had taken preference in Shanghai as a subject of talk over the increasing tension among the European powers.

Both rogues were equally convinced of their irresistible powers of seduction. Money enthralled them, but women excited them more. Boris was the richer of the two, but whenever he discovered by roundabout means that Paolo had made a new conquest, he felt irritated, humiliated and belittled in his own eyes. He must immediately go out and add a new scalp to his belt.

Their adventures were the delight of their business manager, a Chinese polyglot who gabbled away in every conceivable language. When he spoke English quickly it sounded like Portuguese, and when he said something in German one would have sworn he was talking Spanish. His name was Mr. Pou, and he had married a student from Peking. Mr. Pou was a good employee, a good husband, and an honest supporter of the Kuomintang; but he talked too fast.

Devoted to his two employers, he showed an excessive curiosity about their "love-affairs." He even kept debit and credit accounts of their various conquests. His knowledge was derived from the fact that the Chinese always know everything about the "Whites"—moreover, it was his habit to listen in at the office to the private telephone conversations between his employers and their various friends. Mr. Pou, who was as quick with addition and subtraction as he was with his tongue, needed no reckoning machine to register the scores. Talking at the rate of three hundred words a minute in his Shanghai dialect, he kept his friends

up to date with the latest news of their conquests. Boris he had nicknamed "The Man from the Steppes," and Paolo "The Volcano Man," a reference to Vesuvius.

"Within the last four moons," said Mr. Pou, "the man from the steppes has disposed of seven women, the Volcano man only five. The last quarterly account is therefore as follows:

Man from the steppes	24
Volcano man	16

"Eight up to the Russian."

The Chinese are great gamblers. Mr. Pou and his associates were not content to stake their dollars on cricket-fighting at Liang's gaming-house in Fou-Chow Road, at *Fantan*, Lotto, and other games of chance—they must needs also organize a book on the number of hearts broken by Boris and Paolo. The idea was quite simple. Mr. Pou laid the odds and the punters backed their fancy. For example, one would speculate on Paolo's having seven separate affairs during the coming month. Mr. Pou would quote his odds; the punter would put down his five dollars, and if on the last day of the month it was verified that the seven victims had fallen, Mr. Pou paid out, three to one, or as the case might be. Thus the gay pair's employees either added to or diminished their wages according to their appreciation of the current situation, their luck, the caprices of their employers and the morals of the fair ladies they were chasing during that particular period.

And Boris and Paolo certainly afforded them many opportunities for gratifying their gambling instincts. This descendant of the Borgias, decadent, unctuous, sly, cynical in his eloquence, yet perverse, pleased a certain type of woman, while others preferred the slim elegance, the super refinement and the inflexible will of the Russian aristocrat. This rivalry was also a source of endless amusement to the local gossips, to the Badminton players at the French Club, to the drunkards at the International Bar, to the *poûles de luxe* of the various Concessions and, ultimate tribute, even to the gentlemen of the Corps Diplomatique.

On that particular afternoon, having finished discussing freight, cargoes, tariffs and premiums, Boris lit a Russian cigarette, which had his coat-of-arms stamped on the paper, and said:

"Paolo, remember you're dining at my house this evening."

"I hadn't forgotten. It's a bachelor party, isn't it?"

"Yes, but they're all bringing their usual attendant sylphs. And, remembering that you said the other day that you hadn't found anything new to show us, I thought I would find someone for you myself."

Paolo's eyes suddenly lit up. "Who?" he said.

"I don't know her."

"What! You're inviting someone you don't even know?"

"Exactly, just for a change. It becomes monotonous always to have the same filly running round the race-course. So don't ask me how I've done it, but I've found you a baroness."

"Thanks in anticipation."

"Not at all."

"Only it makes me uneasy. Baronesses are nearly always fifty-four years old."

"This one is beautiful and only eighteen."

"Ah ha; that's better!"

"Yes, but wait. She's a widow."

"A widow at eighteen? She kills them off pretty quick!"

"You who like danger!"

"Yes, I wasn't complaining. It sounds rather exciting. A beautiful, eighteen-year-old widow! What nationality?"

"French."

"Oh no, Boris, that's too much; you're spoiling me!"

"I thought you preferred Italians."

"To talk to, yes. But love, like prayer, needs occasional intervals of silence."

"Very well, but remember that half a loaf is better than no bread."

"A Frenchwoman—oooh!"

Paolo closed his eyes in rapture, like a wine-taster smelling the bouquet of an old Burgundy.

"How can one help loving French women! Caro mio! They never get drunk, they're never selfish in love, and, bless their hearts, when giddiness threatens to overwhelm them, the little darlings, their thoughts turn to their mothers."



Boris's residence had been nicknamed the *Petit Trianon*. The park skirted the Avenue Joffre in the French Concession, a park full of tropical trees, with stone buddhas and red tents dotted about here and there. In front of the house was a stretch of water with lotus leaves, which reflected a little temple, a replica of the 'Pagoda of the Green Cloud' in Peking.

Punctually at a quarter to eight Uncle Larry's car drew up under the portico of the *Petit Trianon*, and Claudette stepped out. She had noticed with some surprise that the park was policed by men in black leather jackets, armed with revolvers. They were White Russians who formed the '*praetorian*' bodyguard of the

precious Count Stolitzine, descendant of the man who had known how to satisfy, in the short intervals between Cabinet-meetings, the lusts of a man-mad Czarina.

Magali had insisted that Claudette should arrive late for she wanted her to make a theatrical entrance. She had longed to be able to witness her daughter entering the big drawing-room with its Coromandel-lacquered walls, its glass cabinets filled with precious collections of matchless jade, of rare idols, of pink or smoked crystals, and of ancient weapons worn by wild warriors of the Tsing period. Boris kissed Claudette's hand and his smile was already a tribute to her attraction.

"Baroness, I lay my respects at your feet."

"And I, my dear Count, hang my excuses round your neck. Women will always be unpunctual so long as men are excited by suspense."

"In that case, will you allow me to present to you your first victim, my friend Paolo Borgia?"

The Italian bowed, his monocle screwed tightly under his bushy eyebrows. Claudette, whose arrival had interrupted the general conversation, was introduced to all the other guests in turn. First came Fernand Broutillon, director of the Franco-Siamese Bank, and his little friend, Madame Grace-Ho; then Charles Appenzell, a Swiss engineer, director of the Tramway Company in Nanking with his friend Mireille Dargens, a lively Parisian journalist who walked about Shanghai rolling her eyes and flaunting her hips, in turn the Egeria of Mandarins, parasite at the various legations, and reporter at business meetings; then Harold Flynn, a rich Californian petrol magnate, who never missed an invitation to Boris's parties, and who had brought as his girl-friend Frances Carlisle, a muscular Englishwoman, whose low-necked evening dress revealed a formidable bust and the brawny arms of a hockey champion; finally Dr. Mohamed Ali Jumma, in ordinary life professor at the College of Oriental Languages in Calcutta, now acting as Cicibeo to the Marquise de Casa Mello, a vindictive Andalusian with gipsy blood in her veins.

Everyone seemed to have been anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Baroness de Mauchamp. When the murmur of conversation had once more started, Paolo Borgia whispered to Mireille Dargens:

"There's a woman who, when she enters a drawing-room, literally swamps it."

"*You* needn't complain, you old sybarite. She's yours for the evening."

Indeed, Claudette that night looked resplendent. Her mother had devoted more than an hour to preparing her for the party.

She had chosen a dress of yellow organdie, with a horizontal *décolletée* in the style of Winterhalter—a dress from which Claudette emerged like Venus from a bath of whipped caramel cream. The dress set off her brown skin to perfection. She wore a necklace of amethysts, the Hobson family's last remaining jewel, which toned with a pair of long mauve suède gloves.

Boris finished his round of introductions by presenting Claudette to his own lady friend, or rather to the personage who had been summoned at the last moment to play the rôle—Madame Flora Ying, a little scented, fragile Chinese girl, rose-tinted like a piece of Dresden china, beautifully attired in a flowered silk, turquoise-blue gown, embroidered with coral and amber beads.

All Shanghai knew where Boris had unearthed this little gem. Not in an old palace buried at the bottom of a *Hutung* in the *Tartar City* of Peking; not in a flower-boat on the Pearl River, reserved for the lordlings of the Cantonese war or the rich pirates of Bias Bay. He had found Madame Flora Ying quite simply in a night-club in Sutter Street, San Francisco, the *Forbidden City*, where half a dozen Chinese girls had been engaged to amuse tourists by singing vulgar sailors' songs with their own peculiar stylized gestures. Melle Flora Ying put on a special act. She undressed in an extremely narrow golden cage. Although her act held some of the glamour of the Orient, it was not, in fact, unlike the typical strip-tease performance of a New York show of the kind which invariably attracts curious youngsters, hungry-eyed bachelors and blasé widowers, and where for a dollar the audience may feast its eyes upon some ravishing beauty in evening gown nonchalantly shedding her garments to the strains of a Strauss waltz.

The conversation grew more animated as the cocktails were passed around. When the head butler, a tall Manchurian in a dark blue silken robe, announced that dinner was served, the spirit of gaiety had already permeated the walls of the *Petit Trianon*.

Paolo Borgia offered Claudette his arm to escort her to the dining-room. The dinner table had a magnificently ornate china centre-piece, representing Bacchus and his suite. The dinner-service was of dove grey kaolin, engraved with the Stolitazine arms. Orchids wilted in the warmth of yellow candles in heavy silver candelabra. The six white-clad servants padded noiselessly about in their felt slippers. Claudette had never before dined in such luxury. The governmental state dinners in Indo-China could not compete with this impeccable lay-out.

While the swallows-nest soup was being served, Claudette began to take notice of her neighbour. Paolo Borgia was another

of those fantastic creatures which the Far East offers as a study for dissectors of the human soul.

Born Paolo Toretta de Petti-Petta, he soon realized that this comic-opera name would be a handicap for him in life. He decided to change it. Hesitating at first between Consignore and Marchese, he finally decided to assume a historic name which would dazzle all his female acquaintances. Without the smallest justification he decided to become a descendant of the illustrious family of Borgia. He paid genealogists ten thousand lire to prove that his ancestor, Francesco Toretta de Petti-Petta, had in his veins some of the blood of Pope Alexander VI. And lo, happy coincidence, when Paolo's face was compared with Pinturricchio's portrait of the Pope on his knees in the fresco of the Resurrection it was observed that Paolo had the same profile, the same hooked nose, the same oval head, the same plump, sensual hands. The genealogists could not trace Paolo's descent through the beautiful Vanezza, one of his Holiness's favourite concubines, but after a thorough search of the Vatican archives and Gherardi's "*Diarium Romanum*," they had discovered that at the time of the marriage of Lucrezia, Alexander VI had accompanied his daughter and her husband to their bridal chamber and had been so disquietened by the connubial scene that he had departed to satisfy his own desires with a certain Laura de Mantone. The illegitimate child of this brief episode was destined to become the ancestor of the Toretas de Petti-Petta.

Confronted with this flattering proof of his origin, Paolo did not hesitate. Henceforth he bore with pride the shameful name of Borgia, the result of the impious love-affairs of the Pope. He even spoke of the Duchess of Ferrara in the familiar manner in which one speaks of a distant relation. "My late cousin Lucrezia," he would say emphatically, "is one of the most misrepresented people in history. She was a great talker, but did comparatively little poisoning."

Paolo Borgia was fundamentally a buffoon. Learned, cultured, morally depraved, yet shrewd in business and an expert fencer, he had been nicknamed *the Adventurous Petronius*. He was a strange composite personality, obstinate, grasping, yet full of superstitious belief in the remission of sins. He never failed to go to Mass on Sunday. He was kind to the poor, and always slipped a twenty-dollar bill into the collecting box under the altar of the Virgin. He went to Confession, and took the Sacrament regularly every Easter. The strange creature had his own peculiar way of bewildering any priest who listened for the first time to his outpourings. In a contrite voice he would murmur, "Father, before I confess to you my little peccadillos I must tell you who I am.

My paternal ancestor was none other than that ignoble and Simoniacal Pope Alexander VI. I hope, therefore, that my genealogical descent will make you more lenient towards my little failings." The baffled priest thought he was dealing with a semi-lunatic, and would listen nervously to Paolo's subsequent recital.

Claudette conversed alternatively in English with Dr. Mohamed Ali Jumma, who spoke with the purest Oxford accent, and in French with Paolo, who had already begun to pay her little attentions. She could not resist the temptation of asking him the deadly question, "If I am not mistaken, your name is Borgia. Are you a descendant of that most illustrious family?"

"My dear Baroness, I am ashamed to admit to you that History, which has catalogued six illegitimate sons to Pope Alexander VI, has forgotten one: Myself!"

"It's not possible!"

"I'm afraid I'm not very proud of my descent." Paolo was lying outrageously. He continued, "'Illegitime genitos,' Baroness. We are born where Nature choses. Are you a Catholic?"

"Yes."

"I too, despite my beaky nose . . . this guinea-fowl is delicious; I adore French cooking. Do you like 'A la recherche du temps perdu'? Marcel Proust is to my mind a snatcher at will-o'-the-wisps, if you get my meaning. He's no ordinary sybarite."

Paolo Borgia was very talkative, and had an irritating habit of anticipating the answers to his own questions. By the time the dessert was handed round, Claudette was exhausted by his chatter. He had thoroughly enjoyed himself dazzling this young widow. He made his first advance with the *crêpes Suzette*.

"My dear, I bless the happy chance which has brought us together to-night under Boris's roof. He had promised me a very special companion. He has spoilt me . . . Please scribble your telephone number on this card."

"You forget, Mr. Borgia, that if anyone has a right to know my telephone number, it is our host. So perhaps you will be good enough to apply to him."

Borgia put his monocle to his eye, and smiled.

"Oh, I see. My charming opponent retreats to make a better thrust! Not bad, not bad at all! The duel will be fascinating! Your wish shall be granted, my dear . . . er what is your Christian name incidentally? Or must I again apply to Boris for information?"

"You can always try."

"Very well: so at present I'm talking to the Veiled Lady of Shanghai?"

"Are you afraid of the wolf, my dear Commendatore?"

Paolo Borgia leaned back against his chair and dropped his monocle. His black eyes gleamed under his tooth-brush eyebrows. He looked at her, and said gently:

"She's charming . . . delicious . . . entrancing . . . And so *very* French!"



That evening at Boris's the conversation became free, not to say broad. But though the talk was bold, the general behaviour of the guests was beyond reproach. Fernand Brouillon's *Marseillaise* stories had made Frances Carlisle cry with laughter, for she adored *risqué* jokes, and Borgia's powers of mimicry had caused the two Chinese women to burst into shrill cries of laughter. They had understood the gestures.

During the whole of dinner, Boris had been longing to get into conversation with Claudette. He made a secret arrangement with Paolo to borrow her for the evening, and Claudette eventually found herself in *tête-à-tête* with him, in a corner of the smoking-room decorated with old Russian engravings. She was definitely intrigued to find herself seated beside this legendary figure, of whom her mother had given such a vivid and eloquent description.

Claudette was not disappointed. On the contrary. After Borgia's wild verbal extravagances, Boris's restrained talk was like taking a warm bath after a long march. It was a salutary relaxation after the acrobatic efforts of the dinner-table, with a partner who juggled with words like a conjurer, bringing innuendos out of a hat and piling them at the embarrassed listener's feet. Claudette was much more impressed with Boris than she had been with Borgia. He spoke gently to her, in a low, quiet voice; he did not plague her with profuse compliments, and he was clever enough not to make her feel, as Paolo had done, that she was destined to end the evening in a alcove. His delicacy and restraint won Claudette's heart, and it irked her that she should be obliged to play a part and could not relax and be herself.

"As you say, my dear Count," she sighed, "it's extraordinary to find oneself a widow at eighteen. Just imagine a film beginning beautifully, and then the reel suddenly snapping. I hope you'll forgive me for not practising self-immolation as the Hindoo women do."

"Not only do I forgive you, but I am grateful to you for abstaining. And speaking of gratitude, I shall not forget to express mine to Mrs. Hobson. Is she a great friend of yours, Mrs. Hobson?"

Claudette flushed. She was a bad liar. It needed all her presence of mind not to blurt out the truth then and there. But she remembered the promise she had made to her mother to reveal nothing.

"Yes," she said. "I know her well. She's a very nice woman who has had an unhappy life. She deserves something far better than the *Topaze*, you know."

"Where did you meet her?"

"In Indo-China."

"Who was Mr. Hobson?"

"He was a director of the Asiatic Oil Company in Saigon."

"Do you intend to stay on in Shanghai?"

"Yes. Why not? I haven't any other ties."

"No sentimental attachments in the French colony?"

"None."

"Then Paolo Borgia is a lucky man."

"Why?"

"Because he'll have no rivals in his attempts to gain your affections."

"He's tried already!"

"Did he succeed?"

"No, he failed."

"But what about the magnetism of the Borgia?"

"Just like the atmospherics on my wireless-set!"

Boris was delighted with this reply. He looked at Claudette, appraising her intellectually like a man for whom women held no fresh secrets, and summed her up very quickly in his mind: 'young widow badly "initiated" by a sentimental bungler—intelligent and quick-witted—well-educated—romantically unsatisfied—pretty skin—firm, elegant silhouette—delicate hands—should quickly get a lover who can produce thirty thousand volts of passion—temperament held in check by acquired inhibitions—filthy old Borgia would be quite capable of pouncing upon her like a jaguar on an antelope.'

Boris's lightning processes of thought resulted in the final conclusion that there was no reason in heaven why he should reserve this exquisite lily for a lecherous old chatterbox who would certainly crush her between his pudgy hands.

"Well, my dear," he said, getting to his feet, "my duties as a host oblige me to put an end to our *tête-à-tête*; but in conclusion I would like to say how sorry I am to have put you next to Paolo Borgia at dinner to-night. You see, I don't pay compliments, but please take it from me that the less I say, the more I appreciate."

Boris and Claudette, returning to the drawing-room, ran head-on into Paolo, who had been worrying for some time about his partner's disappearance.

"At last," he cried; "here's my lovely widow. Boris, you'd no right to monopolize this lovely child. She's mine by contract, you know!"

The Russian and the Italian exchanged looks. Boris was annoyed to hear his guest calling Claudette "this child," and talking of her as "mine." He answered:

"Paolo, you forget that the Baroness is neither a piece of furniture, nor a tame pigeon. She's got a will of her own."

"Er—I beg your pardon! But Boris, you're a man of your word. You told me this evening that you had a lovely Baroness to offer me. Well, I've seen her and I intend to keep her."

Claudette was amused by this little passage of arms. She put in gently:

"Gentlemen, quarrel over the bone if you must, but at least leave me the marrow!"

Paolo sat down beside Claudette, and stroked her naked arm in a familiar manner:

"But I'm right, aren't I, my pretty one. Our friend Boris gave you to me as a present. The French code says 'Giving and keeping are not consistent.'"

Claudette was flattered. Here, were two rich, influential men quarrelling over her on her very first entry into Shanghai's *beau monde*; a descendant of one of Catherine the Great's lovers matched against a descendant of Pope Alexander VI. Fate was spoiling her.

Boris was sufficiently tactful not to prolong this dialogue. Moreover, he was at that moment interrupted by the Marquise de Casa Mello, who came up in a state of great excitement and said:

"Quick, Boris. We're playing the guessing game. You have to go into another room and guess what the person has answered. It's very amusing. Mireille Dargens was asked 'Suppose you are married, and by mistake you are sent a mink-coat intended for your husband's mistress, what would you do?' I, who had to guess what Mireille would have done, said that she'd have kept the coat. Do you know what Mireille had answered? Not only that she'd keep the coat, but that to give her rival a knock-out blow, she'd send her back in the same box a little piece of carrot rabbit-skin! Come on, Boris, it's your turn to be put in the torture chamber."

Boris went off with the impetuous Andalusian, and Claudette remained a prey to the attentions of Paolo.

Chroniclers of the period have left to posterity a most arresting picture of Pope Alexander VI, Paolo's ancestor. They have described him as a rake who, even under the weight of his car-

dinal's robes, did not hesitate to torment any lovely creature who came within his reach. Paolo Borgia, like his hypothetical ancestor, had the sensual lips and the glittering eyes of a perpetually questing satyr, and the bounding vitality which needed constant erotic gratification as a safety-valve for his emotions.

Like a great tom-cat, terror of the neighbouring tiles, he watched Claudette, purring in expectation. It had to be admitted that he possessed a certain fluency and brilliance which would have appealed to his late lamented compatriot, Gabriel d'Annunzio. His extraordinary flow of bizarre ideas sent Claudette into a sort of stupor.

"My dear," he said, "you've come into my life at exactly the right moment. In my august ancestor's coat-of-arms you will find represented an heraldic bull, which symbolized his full-blooded temperament. I, for my part, am subtler in my excesses. I'm no *condottiere*, no mandolin player—I don't attack women; I don't go down on my knees to them. I treat them like patients. You get me? No? Well, what I mean is, I take their temperatures. I nurse them. Women are all fever cases, and we men act as their quinine. You've read Stendhal, Baroness? Like Stendhal, I divide love into four component parts, but mine are not the same as his: 'love-relaxation' which satisfies the mind; 'love-hygiene' which satisfies the body; 'love-publicity' which flatters the pride, and 'love-vengeance,' the joy of the adulterer."

"You're forgetting one, Commendatore."

"Which is that?"

"Love-novocaine."

"Oh, what's that? A new vice?"

"No; just love that sends the patient to sleep."

Paolo's monocle flew out of his eye like a sling at the end of its black ribbon. He didn't know what to make of this remark, and endeavoured to laugh it off.

"Oh! That's good! You've got a pretty wit. I'm going to make you a confession. I adore being teased! Ha! . . . Ha! 'Castigat ridendo mores' . . . Woman, like an untamed mare, is always goaded by the rider's spur. You can mock at my romanticism, my dear! Romanticism may be just a string of silly adjectives . . . but *I* find *nothing* silly in it. Trickeries, hypocrisies, weepings and wailings under the moon, I can't have too much of any of these things."

Claudette was beginning to weary of this human tap which flowed on ceaselessly. She got up.

"Mr. Borgia, you're compromising me. Let's go and join the others in the drawing-room."

They came upon a scene of great animation. Mireille Dargens

took Claudette by the arm and dragged her into a corner. Very familiar, like a journalist who has seen everything, she said:

"Baroness, I find you very charming. I don't usually find myself talking like this to a woman more beautiful than myself. But quite honestly, you're madly attractive. How is it that you've never before been to Boris's house?"

"I've only just arrived in Shanghai. Don't you think he's a wonderful host?"

"And how! He's so distinguished. Jean Lorrain would have given him the place of honour in his portrait gallery of Riviera aesthetes, in the days when people still knew how to die gracefully under the shade of a mimosa tree."

"Tell me, Mademoiselle Dargens . . ."

"Call me Mireille like everyone else."

"Very well. Tell me, Mireille, who exactly is that son of an archbishop who seems to have been born with a monocle?"

"Paolo? Oh him! I don't mind betting he's been pestering you. But he's less dangerous than he looks. He's more bark than bite. Has he asked you to his house?"

"Not yet."

"When he drives you home, he'll want to show you his Chinese engravings. He's got a collection of extremely indecent mosaics. Don't go in."

"Does he assault you at once?"

"Yes, I'm afraid he does. But worse than that, he's epileptic."

"Oh, good heavens!"

"When the fit comes on, you're in for half an hour of positive nightmare!"

"Thank you for warning me."

"Would you like me to lend you Charles in exchange?"

"What Charles?"

"Charles Appenzell, my boy-friend. He's Swiss, and sings lovely Tyrolean songs. I'm not a jealous person."

"Thank you, Mireille: you're very kind, but really, I've got no appetite for that sort of thing."

"Just as you like, my dear. It's only one of those little services that white people do for each other in Asia."

At about one in the morning, Fernand Broutillon rose and took his leave. It was a signal for everyone to do the same. Frances Carlisle, in her usual hearty English manner, was discussing the merits of Ravel's "Bolero" with the Marquise de Casa Mello, and telling her the well-known colonial story of the Indian Governor's wife, who, when asked if she liked Ravel's "Bolero," replied haughtily, "Oh, I only go to Molyneux for my clothes."

Boris took leave of Claudette. Kissing her hand, he whispered: "Baroness, you owe me what the 1900 bourgeoisie used to call 'a formal call.'"

"Yes, I think that can be arranged."

"How?"

"Through the medium of Mrs. Hobson."

"Excellent! I'm sorry not to have had a longer talk with you this evening."

"Yes. I, too, leave dissatisfied!"

The sudden excited flicker in Boris's eyes told Claudette that he appreciated her quiet compliment. He said:

"Paolo will drive you home."

"Yes, *straight* home, Count Stolitzone."

Her reply delighted Stolitzone. At that moment Paolo arrived in search of his prey. Claudette stepped into the black limousine, which glided swiftly away.

"You haven't enquired my address," said Claudette in an astonished tone of voice.

"Your address is my address!"

Claudette wished to avoid an unpleasant scene. She said jokingly:

"Don't you suppose I have a home?"

"What, you refuse to come and see my . . ."

"Your Chinese engravings? Yes. It's *you* who must visit *me*, where there are *no* engravings."

Paolo's monocle dropped on to his white waistcoat. He could not believe his ears. Claudette went on:

"Unfortunately it's rather dangerous. My Mongolian lover comes home about two in the morning. He's very good with the carving-knife. If he sees us together there'll be none of that classical wailing: 'Oh this everlasting uncertainty!' Oh no, he's so sharp that I can already picture that lovely head of yours rolling under the sofa."

"No, really, Baroness, you're wrong to joke like that. Give the chauffeur your address."

The car turned towards Amoy Road. Claudette looked at Paolo from the corner of her eye. He seemed perfectly at ease and not at all frightened by this Mongolian scarecrow. Finally the car drew up at Uncle Larry's house. Claudette gave her hand to Paolo to say good-bye; he seized it like a drowning man seizing at a buoy.

"I'm coming in, Baroness; I mean it."

"You really mean you want to be killed?"

"Nonsense. I don't believe your childish tales. Your Mongol doesn't exist."

"You're too young to die, you know."

"Come on, this silly joke's played out. Get out of the car."

Claudette put on a very serious expression.

"I'm not lying," she said. "I've got a lover."

"And do you think that's going to frighten a Borgia? I never imagined you were a virgin. If your lover doesn't like me, I can deal with him."

"I never doubted your courage, but I don't want a dramatic scene on the first day of my arrival in Shanghai."

"I'm coming in."

"No, stay where you are."

"So you don't like me?"

"You can see perfectly well that you're just irritating me."

"Baroness, I can't leave you so suddenly. You're wonderful, you're exquisite!"

"Quiet!! Listen!"

They heard the regular footsteps of a coolie approaching with his rickshaw along the asphalt road. Paolo peeped through the back window of the car, and whispered:

"The rickshaw's stopped just behind us. It's your bogymen. I'm going to sock him one."

"You're mad!"

"Of course I'm mad, because I'm in love."

Paolo opened the door of the car to get out—then bounced back on to the cushions in amazement:

"It's a woman! You're living with a woman?"

Claudette looked out and saw her mother walking up the little garden. She breathed more freely.

"Do you understand at last, Commendatore? I share the house with a woman. We shall only disturb her, so I'll say good night."

Paolo sighed with disappointment. Once more he seized Claudette by the wrist, and started to declaim.

"The poet says, 'To part is to die a little.' What a common beast! What a vulgar little commercial traveller! What a deplorable platitude! What poverty of imagination! Parting is *not* dying a little—it's dying in extreme agony, like a lion wounded in open country, its throat parched, its tongue hanging out! Leaving you, Baroness? Why, it's saying good-bye to everything gentle, tender, restful and harmonious; it's dying a hundred deaths one after the other. Baroness, your dear presence has left me, and dreams have already taken hold of me. I dream of minarets and turquoises, rose-leaves and jasmine petals; darling, pretty one, I want to lay my head upon your empty pillow, I want . . ."

But Claudette had long ceased to listen. She had escaped.

Paolo, however, continued his verbal meanderings. Carried away by his own eloquence, he went on talking to himself, with only the car as audience. Suddenly the chauffeur, a retired colonial soldier, broke rudely in upon these reveries, and in a cynical voice enquired through the window:

"Well, are we staying or going?"

Recalled thus to stern reality, Paolo Borgia wailed:

"Oh, all right, drive home."

And the black limousine glided off in the darkness.



As Claudette entered the house, Magali was taking off her hat. She held out her hands to welcome her daughter, and asked:

"Well, darling ? "

Claudette seized her mother round the waist, and cried joyfully:

"Mother darling, it was a triumph!"

"For Heaven's sake, tell me all about it. I came out earlier than usual from the *Topaze*, as I was so anxious to hear what had happened."

Claudette repeated word for word every incident of the party, while her mother listened open-mouthed. After half an hour's exhaustive description, Claudette started to undress. Finally she said:

"Thanks to you, Mother, I've already got two slaves bound to my chariot wheels, one of them the descendant of a nobleman at the court of Catherine the Great, the other of a Pope's illegitimate son."

"Was it Borgia who brought you home in the black limousine which I saw at the gate?"

"Yes. He absolutely insisted on coming in. But it's the other man I want to meet again. . . . Boris."

"What did I tell you? Stolitzine's a gentleman."

"Mother, I must have a *tête-à-tête* with him, quickly."

"Patience, child. Not so fast. Go to bed now; dream sweet dreams, and leave your mother to plan out her campaign. None of them know that you're my daughter, do they?"

"No. I'm the Veiled Lady of Shanghai."

"Excellent. Remember, darling, that when one man's interested in a woman, she's gambling on even chances; but when she's got two, then she's quite likely to break the bank. Good night, Baroness."

VII

CLAUDETTE'S sleep was haunted by grotesque nightmares. She thought she was a Czarina, dancing the Tarantella in front of the Chateau d'Oeuf with an undertaker who had just poisoned his relations.

Magali, for her part, could not sleep. She lay watching her beloved Claudette, who kept jumping about in bed like an eel in a pot. With the weight of past experience to help her, Magali pondered over her plan of campaign. Like a game-keeper, expert in the lie of the land, she worked out the best means of driving one or other of the prize beasts towards the gun of her huntress Diana.

But which was it to be?

She already knew about Boris. And on that same evening, at the *Topaze*, she had made enquiries about Paolo Borgia. He was said to be rich, but not so rich as Boris. From what she had heard, he was also a slight object of ridicule, a rather bloated, over-ripe Beau Brummel, inclined to trumpet out his triumphs to the world at large. One of the *Topaze habitués* had confided in Magali:

"Paolo Borgia? He's a sort of Casanova-bookie who gives tips on his own love-affairs. He doesn't say 'I seduced someone last night'; he says 'I shall be seducing someone to-morrow afternoon at five o'clock.' He talks so much that he actually discourages the more puritanical of his customers. A young woman once said to him, 'Very well, Paolo, I'll come to your house, but directly you open your mouth, I put on my clothes and leave!' That man's talk is like the rattle of a machine-gun; it doesn't kill, it just sends you to sleep."

As dawn broke, Magali fell into a doze. She had decided to use the most effective weapon of all: silence. To-morrow the Baroness de Mauchamp would disappear without leaving any address.

The following afternoon, just as Claudette was waking up, Li knocked at the door and came in with a spray of red roses and a white cardboard box bearing the label of a fashionable fancy-goods shop near the Hotel Cathay. Claudette cried out:

"Oh! They've already begun to spoil the 'Veiled Lady.' Let me see, Mother. Who's it from?"

Magali opened the envelope and smiled:

"A cruel disappointment for you, my love. It's addressed to your mother." And she read aloud:

"To Mrs. Hobson, who shares with the stars the gift of influencing the destinies of mankind, in grateful remembrance from

"BORIS STOLITZINE."

"Bravo, Mama," cried Claudette. "You've made a conquest too. Open the box quickly."

Magali tore off the tissue-paper and disclosed a magnificent pearl evening-bag in white and gold, with an old-fashioned lapis-lazuli clasp. It was an offering of princely generosity. Magali nodded:

"What did I say, child! . . . He's a gentleman."

She had not long to wait before her plan of campaign bore fruit. Boris, whose visits to the *Topaze* were usually very infrequent, reappeared two days later, came straight towards Magali's table and sat down beside her.

"Mrs. Hobson," he said, "you shouldn't thank me for that little trinket. It's I who am indebted to you. And I'm going to trespass on your kindness by asking you to give me the Baroness's address."

"Her address? I'm most dreadfully sorry, Count Stolitzine, but she's left Shanghai."

Boris looked nonplussed.

"Left Shanghai? But she told me she had no ties anywhere but here."

Magali took a chance.

"Is the Commendatore in town?"

This remark again startled Boris, who answered:

"No, actually he isn't . . . he's gone away for a few days. He's at Nanking."

"Perhaps the Baroness . . ."

Magali didn't need to finish her sentence. Boris gave himself away by the speed of his retort:

"Oh, but she told me she was absolutely bored to death by that poisoner."

"Yes, Count Stolitzine, but remember Verdi . . . 'La Donna e mobile.'"

"I'll get to the bottom of this mystery."

"With the help of your private detectives you oughtn't to find it difficult."

"Tell me something about her," said Boris. "I really know so little."

Magali's inventive powers came to her rescue. Without undue emphasis, she outlined the Baroness's character, half praising, half malicious, so as to make her description seem more realistic. The

longer Boris listened, the more he appeared to regret her sudden disappearance. And the more he regretted it, the more he began to suspect Paolo Borgia of trying to cut him out. When Magali had finished, he rose and left her with the injunction that she was to inform him the moment the Baroness returned.

"I won't fail you, Count Stolitine. Aren't you going to dance with one of our girls this evening?"

Boris gave her a reproachful look which seemed to say "You've offered me diamonds, and now you think you can satisfy me with paste." Magali smiled. She was content. Her scheme had worked well. She had hooked the fish—now she need only play him gently.



While Magali was engaged in conversation with Boris at the *Topaze*, a black limousine drew up in front of the house in Amoy Road. Paolo Borgia stepped out. He had just returned from Nanking. He rang the bell. Li opened the door with an obsequious smile.

"Is the Baroness de Mauchamp at home?"

Li, knowing nothing of Claudette's alias, shook his head in a decided manner.

"There's no Baroness here, Mister. What Baroness do you require?"

"The Baroness de Mauchamp."

Li again shook his head.

Paolo Borgia began to get annoyed.

"Come, come. I drove the Baroness de Mauchamp back to this house last Friday evening."

"Sorry . . . do not know Baroness."

Paolo slipped a dollar into the Chinaman's hand. Li looked woe-begone. Were he a magician, he would willingly have summoned up a Baroness from the vasty deep to satisfy this generous caller. He bent himself double with humility.

"Velly solly . . . No can do. I'll ask Missi if she knows the Baroness . . . er . . ."

"de Mauchamp."

"Mochampppppp . . . Can do . . . wait a moment, please."

Li knocked on the door of Claudette's room. She was practising Chinese writing. When she heard that Paolo Borgia had had the audacity to pursue her to her home, she was enraged. Hesitating for a moment as to what to reply, she eventually gave Li his instructions. Li obediently went down to the gate, and gave Paolo the following message.

"Master," he said, bowing low, "velly solly. Baroness only calls here to fetch her mail. She does not live here . . . velly solly."

Paolo, frustrated, stepped back into the limousine, and drove to the club to telephone to Boris. There were certain business affairs which had to be discussed, notably the armament question, which had been the reason for Paolo's sudden departure for Nanking. The club porter, who was well acquainted both with Borgia and Stolitzine, informed him that he would probably find the Count at the *Topaze*. Thither Paolo wended his way, arriving a few minutes after Boris's departure.

The Manager conducted him over to Magali's table and said: "Mrs. Hobson; Signor Commendatore Borgia wishes to speak to Count Stolitzine. Can you tell me where he is?"

Paolo bowed to Magali in a distant manner, and echoed the manager's words:

"Yes, I'm looking for my friend Boris."

Magali watched Paolo with the greatest interest. She recognized him at once from her daughter's description. Indeed, she would know him anywhere. Paolo was just sauntering off when Magali recalled him quietly:

"Your friend seemed in a great hurry, Commendatore. He confided to me that he had a rendezvous with a certain young woman who had dined at his house last Friday."

Paolo turned sharply on his tracks. This conversation with the *taxi-girl Captain* was becoming interesting. He sat down, offered Magali a liqueur, and asked, "To what woman do you refer?"

Magali, with an air of mock innocence, replied:

"Oh, Commendatore! Discretion forbids me to . . ."

"Come, come now. Answer yes or no to my question. Is she a widow?"

Magali hung her head and sighed.

"Yes."

"Is she—very pretty?"

"Yes."

"And that pig of a Boris is already on her tracks!"

Magali put on a pained expression.

"Yes, yes," insisted Paolo. "I bet that lewd old devil is already staking a claim on the ravishing Baroness. But he hasn't yet got her in his clutches."

Magali looked at him out of the corner of her eye; neatly she planted her little red dart into Paolo's thick neck.

"I don't wish to hurt your feelings, Commendatore, but when Count Stolitzine sets his heart on a woman, his rivals might as well retire from the battlefield."

"Oh, you think so?"

Paolo Borgia screwed his monocle tightly into his eye, to add dignity to his demeanour: "Very well," he said, "he may be Count Stolitzine, but he hasn't yet captured the little Baroness."

Magali, gazing dreamily at her glass of Chartreuse, answered: "I really am very doubtful whether even you, with your subtle Machiavellian methods, could be capable of . . ."

"Very well. Doubt away to your heart's content, my dear Mrs. Hobson . . . Oh, that Cossack, trying to filch my little pet from me behind my back! We'll see about that. Incidentally, have you ever met this Baroness de Mauchamp?"

"No, never."

"Does she, or does she not live in Amoy Road, where I drove her back last Friday night?"

"No, she certainly doesn't live there. That's where I live, and if there were any Baroness in the house, I should certainly have been informed. She must have given that address to put you off the scent."

"But Boris? *He* knows where she lives?"

"Obviously, seeing that he asked her to dinner."

"Yes, of course, that was a silly question. What I meant was—has he told *you* her address?"

"Good heavens; why ever should he?"

"But you might be able to get hold of it?"

"I'll try, if you like. I can promise nothing."

"Mrs. Hobson, get me her address and I'll make you a handsome present. And now please forgive me; I must get hold of Boris."

"Are you going to report our conversation to him?"

"D'you take me for an idiot?" Paolo leant quickly over the table, and, in a burst of lyrical eloquence, whispered in Magali's ear:

"I'm going to lay my plans in silence. The Monster is about to attack Andromeda. Perseus is approaching on his black steed, his lance at the tilt, his eyes ablaze. The monster Boris sinks back into a sea of caviare, while Borgia-Perseus carries off Andromeda and presents her with a Cartier brooch. Life is glorious '*Captain*.' Life always will be glorious while there are women to make men suffer, and while there are men to shed tears of blood in passion's golden cup . . . Waiter, my bill . . . Presto! presto! My dear, you don't know it, but that little widow is as crisp as a fresh pancake fried in olive oil. Good night, *Captain!*"

Paolo bowed theatrically and took his leave. Magali watched his departing figure, hardly able to contain herself for laughter. Mario Ercole, the manager, who had come in for the end of his

declamation, and who knew his compatriot of old merely shrugged his shoulders and muttered in a resigned tone of voice:

"He's completely gagal!"



Magali walked back to Amoy Road, smiling to herself. She woke up her daughter, and told her about Boris's visit. Claudette clapped her hands.

"Mother . . . Mother . . . my shares are going up. Do you know who's been to see me?"

"No."

"Paolo Borgia."

"Good heavens, child. I hope you didn't let him in!"

"No. I obeyed your instructions. I told Li to tell him that the Baroness de Mauchamp only called here to fetch her mail."

"Well done, poppet. Now what do you think happened at the *Topaze*? Five minutes after Boris had left, your Borgia arrived. I dealt with him as I had dealt with Boris. I enticed him like a big bear with a honey-comb. Incidentally, he's barmy, that Borgia friend of yours. But that doesn't matter. Borgia's going to irritate Boris so much with his jealousy that it'll raise you one hundred per cent. in his esteem. Things are moving, Claudette. But take care, child—we must play our cards carefully. At present we're caught in our own toils. Nobody must suspect that Claudette and the Baroness are the same person. To-morrow I shall tell Li that the Baroness de Mauchamp is a friend who likes to have her mail forwarded to this address."

"And how about Uncle Larry, Mother?"

"I'll talk to him to-morrow."

"And Kiwi? Do you know, she's actually growing tame. She spoke to me to-day quite nicely, for the first time. At last she's beginning to realize that I'm not trying to take the bread out of her mouth. The wild cat's drawing in her claws."

"But don't confide in her, all the same."

"No, Mother, I won't. Oh dear, it's so funny playing two parts at the same time: the pure, chaste Miss Hobson and the dashing, temperamental Baroness de Mauchamp."



At eleven the next morning, the postman called with a letter addressed to the Baroness de Mauchamp. The well-trained Li

brought it straight to Magali. Mother and daughter, all agog, tore open the envelope sealed with Paolo's coat-of-arms, and read the following lines written in large, flowery handwriting, which, at a distance, looked like Sanscrit.

"Baroness, oh Baroness! Why these tricks, these pretences, this mystery? Why do you refuse to give me any sign of life? Since last Friday's dinner, your image has never ceased to haunt me. When I close my eyes I hear your voice. Cruel Baroness, widow buttercup! To-night the moon is like a white narcissus in the blue cloak of the firmament. Why are you not here to inflict upon me the torture of the seven knives? But before I suffer at your hands, I shall cut my rival's tongue out of his mouth. Just fancy—I'm already jealous! An ultra-violet jealousy gnaws at my heart; I even hate the coolie who pulls your rickshaw, and the manicurist who fondles your little hands.

"Asia is the land of love, Baroness! The Wang Poo is stranger than the Garonne, the silken-robed mandarin more exciting than the black-coated accountant, the corolla of the lotus lovelier than the heart of the lettuce, and the fumes of opium more rapturous than the smoke from the 'caporal doux.'

"Write to me at the International Club. In China, Happiness is Symbolized by a Man talking of his Fields. For me, the Symbol of Happiness is a Baroness under a Roof, bearing the imprint of my kisses in the palm of her hand.

"PAOLO BORGIA."

Magali and Claudette looked at each other and burst into peals of laughter.

"He's a scream!"

"He must write like an acrobat, with his feet on the ceiling and his pen between his teeth."

"Keep the letter carefully, child. You can show it to your son when he's twenty years old. I'm going now to have a talk with Uncle Larry—he's dabbling in his studio with his paint-box."

Magali went down. On her way to the studio she was, as usual, accosted by the monkey Mephisto, who always made a point of jumping out at her from odd corners.

"Am I disturbing the great master at his work?" said Magali, half-opening the door of the Noah's ark.

"Come in, Magali, come in! I'm trying to paint Hamlet, but the damned old chameleon changes colour so often that I've already had to use twenty different tubes of paint on him. Sit down, Magali."

"Mama mia . . . Shut up . . . Currrrra . . . Crrra . . . kiss me. Danke schön," came Rasputin's voice. Larry shook his paint-box at him in a threatening manner.

"Will you shut up, you old devil! Well, Magali, what news? You're a great success at the *Topaze*, it appears. Mario Ercole told me that you were in high favour with the proprietor—I always thought you'd end by winning Boris's esteem."

"Listen, Larry, that's the very point I wanted to discuss with you. Can I rely on your discretion?"

"Me? I'm as safe as a house. Why?"

Magali told Larry all that had happened. Larry listened attentively, at the same time putting the finishing touches to his painting.

"Ah, ha," he said. "So my niece is launched in high society?"

"Yes, but the only trouble is, we're caught in our own trap. If we want to achieve any lasting results, we must keep Boris in ignorance of the fact that Claudette is my daughter—he must never know that she isn't the Baroness de Mauchamp."

"I see no harm in that. You know I never tell Boris anything about my own private life."

"Good, Larry. Then let's hope that your prudence and circumspection will bring our Baroness good luck."

"Touch wood on that, Magali. . . . Oh, to hell with this chameleon! Now he's changing back from green to violet again!"

Magali left the studio. In the passage she met Kiwi, who gave her a pleasant smile. Her suspicions had been allayed, for she now realized that the Frenchwomen's ambitions lay elsewhere. They had no designs either on her husband or on Alfredo, so she had nothing to fear from them.

Magali suddenly thought of a brilliant idea.

"Kiwi," she said, "would you like some of my Aurora face cream; you know, the kind which smells so good?"

"Oh yes—I would, I would!"

Kiwi was enchanted. She came into Magali's room, and took the little pot of delicious face-cream.

"By the way," said Magali in a nonchalant manner, "I happened to hear the other day at the *Topaze* that Boris's little Chinese friend was a girl called Flora Ying. Do you know her, Kiwi?"

Since Magali had been working at the *Topaze*, Kiwi had become much more outspoken on the subject of Boris. She cried out:

"Do I know that little louse! That little tortoise! That piece of coolie-meat! Aaaaah!! Three years ago she was strip-teasing in San Francisco in a cabaret in the 'Forbidden City'—Scum of the earth. Waaaaaah!"

Kiwi spat unceremoniously on the floor to emphasize her scorn. Magali was delighted. It was good to know what Larry's Chinese woman felt about the other one. In love's 'Kriegspiel' a woman's hatred is worth a hundred machine-guns.

VIII

BORIS STOLITZINE'S Chinese mistress was a native of Canton. It is the fashion among Europeans not yet acclimatized to China, to say that all Chinese women are alike. The Chinese might as well retort that all European women are alike. Chinese women vary in looks according to the district in which they are born, north China, south China, the Coast, or the interior. The Miao Tze women of the province of Yunnan are quite different in appearance from the peasant women of the province of San Si, and neither resembles the other any more closely than a Sicilian farmer's wife resembles the wife of a Norwegian fisherman.

Madame Flora Ying and Madame Chance Suprême were as different as a Rembrandt and a Titian. Flora had a little head shaped like a pigeon's egg, a beautifully modelled tiny beaked nose, languorous eyes, and a tea-rose complexion. Everything about her was tiny; her frail limbs, her delicate hands, her narrow feet, her half-formed breasts. She was a Tanagra figurine, moulded in Shantung clay.

Madame Chance Suprême—Kiwi—was bigger and less fragile in appearance, her nose *retroussé*, her hair falling in a tufted fringe over her domed forehead.

Flora Ying, before landing finally in the San Francisco cabaret, had changed hands many times. Her mother, Mrs. Dragon Pearl, kept a flower-boat, the first boat on the left-hand side of the water-course, looking inland from the Shameen Docks. Little Flora had grown up with French torpedo-boats moored on one side of her, and the building of the British Consulate looming up on her left. Her mother and her two aunts, Mrs. Unique Jade and Purple Hill, provided supper, lodging and the rest for rich Cantonese and French Naval officers. They had brought up the little girl as horse-trainers bring up a thoroughbred filly for the Longchamp or Ascot races. The first offer had come from a General in command of the 33rd Army, a great pot-bellied individual, aged

about 40. He had offered 5,000 taels down for immediate possession. For the space of a whole moon mother and aunts had squabbled like three screeching guinea-fowls. Madame Purple Hill thought that 5,000 taels was a nice tidy sum; Madame Unique Jade had nearly burst herself with fury at the impudence of the old ruffian suggesting such a ridiculously small figure. Madame Dragon Pearl had consulted a renowned fortune-teller in Kowloon, who had made the oracular pronouncement: "If the tadpole swims eastward, it will become a frog," which Madame Dragon Pearl interpreted as meaning that her child would prosper if she took the direction of the rising sun.

At the age of sixteen, therefore, Madame Dragon Pearl's daughter was allocated to a Dutch engineer, for the sum of 10,000 taels. He took her off with him to Java, kept her for a year and then handed her over, free of charge, to one of his clients, a Chinese petrol-agent living in Tientsin. The latter in his turn resold her to the retired aide-de-camp of the Chinese governor of Pe-Tschi-Li, who kept her going for two years on rice and sound advice, eventually tired of her and gave her to an agent of the 'Imperia Film Corporation' in exchange for a six-valve radio set. This American taught her to speak English, to chew gum, to smoke 'Lucky Strikes,' read 'comic strips' and dance the jitterbug like a Harlem half-caste.

One day Flora Ying asked this young man the essential password for a foreigner visiting the U.S.A. The young man, with a knowledge of the world acquired through having navigated Broadway's rapids and whirlpools, replied laughing:

"The word you simply must learn, Flora, is 'alimony.' In my country little girls learn it in their cradles."

Flora Ying was astonished. It's a queer country, she thought, where a woman, once expelled from a house by her Lord and Master, should have the right to extract large sums of money from him. It shocked her to think that a woman could continue to take money from a man while denying him his conjugal rights.

Flora Ying longed to visit this fabulous country, where a woman could so tyrannize over a man, and could regard her own body as a sort of oil-well which must continue to be worked even after the prospector has vanished.

So finally, out of curiosity, she obtained an engagement as a dancer in a San Francisco cabaret. And here it was that three years later Count Stolitzine discovered her. She had been so flattered to find herself the object of this distinguished man's attentions, that on their first evening together she had swooned from sheer pride.

Boris had brought Flora Ying back to Shanghai. He had bought

her a little house at the north end of the International Concession, and, dictator-fashion, had imposed his conditions on her. She was to be at his disposal when he needed her. She was to laugh when he felt jocose, and to make herself scarce when he was bored. She must never ask him any questions of any kind.

Flora had obediently accepted everything, bowing to the will of this wondrous being. He was no Yankee to be led by the nose. He was an Asiatic.

Having a great deal of leisure, Flora paid frequent visits, with her *amah*, an enormous woman from Che-Kiang, to a neighbouring tea-house, reserved for Chinese ladies of quality. There she would sit for hours on end, chatting with other women of her class, all of whom bore poetic names like hers, names which charm the ear and stimulate the fancy: Madame Lotus, Madame Snow Guitare, Madame Apple Blossom, Madame Belle Journée de Clarté, Madame Givre de Jade Blanc. In this club, which was a mixture of a beauty-parlour and a boudoir, the ladies sat around nibbling dried poppy-seed, drinking jasmine tea and gossiping till they sank exhausted. Just like their sisters in far-off Europe, these Shanghai beauties bandied scandals, love-secrets, cruel witticisms and acid compliments.

Here it was that Madame Flora Ying first met Madame Chance Suprême. The two ladies disliked each other cordially from the start, and pecked at one another like two fighting cocks in the arena, rattling rude epithets, offensive allusions and bits of spite across the room like the fire from two machine-guns. The humble Larry worked modestly under Boris's patronage, so Flora Ying thought herself superior to her less glamorous rival, seeing that she was her master's concubine. Madame Chance Suprême, for her part, had never danced nude in a San Francisco cabaret, which gave *her* the advantage over Madame Flora Ying.



Early the following week, Magali considered the moment ripe to move a new pawn on her chess-board. The little Baroness de Mauchamp, the young widow so universally sought after, should make a sudden reappearance in Shanghai. Mother and daughter discussed the matter at length. .

"Mother," said Claudette, "don't you get the impression that when we mention the Baroness de Mauchamp we've brought to life some imaginary third person?"

"Yes, I feel like that myself. Henceforth there are three of us; you, me, and the Baroness, so let's review the situation once

again. On March 5th Boris called twice on me at the *Topaze*, and you received three letters from Paolo Borgia. This absurd game can't go on for ever, so we must once again bring the Baroness to life."

"How?"

"You must send a formal invitation to Count Stolitzine to lunch with you at the Hotel Cathay, to return his hospitality."

"Very well. And I mustn't forget my pedigree—I'm the daughter of a high-grade civil servant, married off at seventeen to the Baron de Mauchamp, administrator of Cambodia, widowed after a year's connubial bliss, alone in the world, sighing and suffering in silence."

"Exactly."

"But this time Boris will want to know where I live."

"You'll say you're staying at the Hotel Cathay. I'll arrange it all with the hall-porter. To add to the mystery, you must never be in if Boris calls."

"And how about Mrs. Magali Hobson? What do we do with her?"

"She's a friend whom you met in Indo-China—a very nice woman down on her luck."

"Okay, Mother. But listen, what precisely is all this leading to?"

"To this: we want to find out exactly the depth of Boris's feelings towards you—I mean, the depth of his feelings for the Baroness. One of two alternatives must follow from our scheming: either the Count will invent some excuse for not pursuing the matter further, or else his intentions will turn out to be serious, in which case he'll end by proposing to you. If he does, then victory is ours."

"Perhaps."

"What do you mean, perhaps? Does it mean nothing to you to become Countess Stolitzine?"

"Less than nothing, if I'm not in love with him, and that I shan't know till later."

"Well, really, Claudette—that's the end! I wear myself to the bone to bring Boris, the uncrowned King of Shanghai, within range for you, and all you say is, 'If I don't like the look of him, I shan't pull the trigger.' Do you want the whole earth? Millions, fame, *and* love?"

"No, Mother. Just love."

"You're mad, you're half-witted!"

"Yes, I know."

Magali exploded with irritation.

"You get on my nerves when you talk like that. For two pins

I'd put you over my knee and smack you! Just think, child, think a moment! There's Count Stolitzine like a ripe peach ready to be picked, and you say you can't even be bothered to reach up!"

"Mother, we've discussed this already a hundred times."

"I'd have thought by now you'd have become more reasonable."

"Don't get angry, Mother, please. I didn't say I'd necessarily turn him down."

"Really? You *don't* mean it! You'd actually condescend?!!"

"Yes, I might condescend; but it wouldn't be for the sake of a coat-of-arms or a million dollars. I couldn't tie myself up to a man who, for all I know, may be unbalanced, a crook, a neurotic, or, quite simply, physically repulsive to me. If I find Boris really attractive, and if he's sufficiently attracted to me to want to marry me—if, I say, if—then it's quite on the cards that the Baroness de Mauchamp may change her name to Countess Stolitzine."

Magali was speechless—breathless with indignation. She paced up and down the room, clasping her hands above her head in desperation.

"You're talking absolute nonsense! It's intolerable! Your vanity and stupidity are beyond belief! Go and look at yourself in the glass. What do you see there? Go on, take a good look! I'll tell you what you see! You see a silly little idiot who in six months from now will probably be earning her living as a waitress in a cafeteria—who throws silly little 'if's' in my face just as I am starting her off on the road to prosperity. Who d'you think you are, you silly little goose?"

"Mother, listen! I want to marry a man whom I'm in love with."

"Even if he's a bottle-washer?"

"Precisely; even if he's a bottle-washer."

Magali rushed towards the door. She was almost bursting with rage. Throwing up her arms in despair, she cried out:

"What have I done to deserve this? Money! Position! Respect! Rank! And she actually spits on it! Merciful heaven! I've brought a monster into the world!"



Magali's rages never lasted longer than it takes scalded milk to simmer down when taken off the fire. At three o'clock on the Thursday following their argument, she was impatiently awaiting Claudette's return from lunching with Boris. Like a good hen she longed to have her chick once more under her wing. She was

worrying about this lunch. Would Claudette know how to follow up her first advantage? Would she fall for Count Stolitzine's charm? Anything might happen to a stubborn little creature like Claudette, with her silly unpractical ideas, and her outmoded views on marriage. She might destroy the whole card-house which Magali had so carefully built up.

The clock had just struck four. Magali, who had been wandering from room to room, grew weary of Rasputin's eternal 'Valentine' and of Mephisto's grinding of teeth. She retired to her bedroom. Suddenly there was a sound of footsteps running up the stairs. In rushed the panting Claudette and, throwing her hat down, cried:

"Poof! The Baroness has played her comedy."

"Well, darling, what happened?"

"The Russian improves on acquaintance."

"Tell me what happened; quick, hurry!"

Magali was feverish to know all. At last Claudette spoke.

"We had an excellent lunch. Boris told me the story of his life like a man who is thinking of the future."

"Well? What did I tell you?"

"He even appeared to be angry with Borgia for running after me! So I followed your advice, and annoyed him still further by saying that Borgia wasn't as bad as all that—oh dear, how funny!—that he was an artist and very subtle—oh, I can't help laughing! In fact, the truth of the matter is that Boris is very jealous of his business partner."

"What mischief are they up to, the two of them?"

"Boris is secretly supplying the army in Chung-king, and Borgia sells information to the Japs. So they cancel each other out. Mother, it's a delightful combination!"

"Oh I see; two smart lads!"

"Boris made me drink Vodka. I became slightly drunk. He must have liked me like that because he invited me to a *tête-à-tête* dinner at his house next Saturday."

"Well, give me your impressions of this afternoon. Imagine you're drafting a communiqué on the battlefield."

"Here's my report then. 'To-day enemy forces took up positions fronting *poulet en casserole*. The Count brought up his heavy artillery. The Baroness countered with bursts of machine-gun fire. Enemy still holding positions.'"

"D'you like the enemy?"

"Well, yes, I think so. I'm actually beginning to consider the possibility . . ."

"Good heavens, child, what a fuss! Why, the man's a marvel. He's got distinction; he's a gentleman!"

"Marry him yourself, Mother!"

"You're just being silly. You've only got to reach up, and he's yours!"

"Oh really; it's not so easy as all that!"

"I don't mind betting that with me to back you you'll be married to him before Easter."

"Darling Mother, you're incredible. To hear you talk, one would think it had already happened. I begin to see myself quite clearly as the Countess Stolitzine, living in the palace in the Avenue Joffre, with a guard of blackshirts on motor-bikes. I picture you, the Queen Mother, coming to lunch. I offer you a *shashlik* strong enough to set the house on fire, and cutlets so *very* 'Pojarsky' that even their frills are stamped with Pushkin's verses. By the time coffee is served, the Queen Mother's as drunk as a Cossack, starts knouting the butler and singing the *Internationale* to the tune of the *Petite Tonkinoise*."

"You're being very silly, Claudette. One day you'll be grateful to me for my efforts, and when you've got a diamond rivi re round your neck you'll say proudly, 'I owe all this to my darling mother.' You know very well that if one wants a thing very badly, one always gets it. *My* wish is to see you Countess Stolitzine, rich, honoured and respected. You'll achieve it, never fear."

"All right, let's hope I do. But you're forgetting one little snag. Who's marrying Boris? The Baroness de Mauchamp or Claudette Hobson?"

"Don't meet obstacles half-way, child. We'll deal with that when the time comes. Either we tell him the truth or we change your civil status. If your happiness depended on a name alone, I'd willingly obliterate my identity altogether, and become your mother's friend, instead of your real mother. It's all very simple. Who knows us in Shanghai? No one but Uncle Larry, and he's a good soul who'd never let the cat out of the bag."

"You're forgetting Kiwi."

"No, no. I haven't forgotten Kiwi. I'll manage her all right. The Queen Mother, as you call me, has more than one card up her sleeve. I'm working on Kiwi, humouring her. That little Chinese girl! She wanted to poison us when we first arrived, but I'll soon have her eating out of my hand—that I promise you."



When Count Stolitzine left the Hotel Cathay, he returned to his office, where he found Paolo Borgia lounging in a green leather armchair with his legs stretched out in front of him. He

was smoking a long cigar and whistling to himself to while away his impatience.

"Oh, so you're here," said Boris. "I thought you were interviewing the director of the Franco-Siamese Bank."

"I've already seen him. The moment the S.S. *Languedoc* arrives with its cargo at the Haiphong Quay, he'll renew that credit of fifty thousand piastres. So all's well in that quarter. But I didn't want to talk shop to you."

"Paolo, you know our agreement. No woman's name to be mentioned before sundown."

Paolo twiddled the black ribbon of his monocle round his finger.

"I only wanted to ask you where you'd been lunching."

"At the Cathay. Why?"

"With a woman?"

"Paolo, once more let me remind you . . ."

"It *was* with a woman, wasn't it?"

"What about professional secrecy, my dear boy?"

"Nonsense! There's no question of professional secrecy where the Baroness de Mauchamp is concerned."

"Oh! So you've started spying on me in my leisure hours!"

"I happened to be passing through the restaurant, and saw you at a distance engaged in a very animated conversation with the Baroness."

"Precisely. Have you any objection?"

"Yes. Your behaviour is not that of a sportsman."

"Why not?"

Paolo examined his well-polished finger-nails and went on:

"You offered me a young lady for your dinner party. You virtually put her at my disposal. Now you're trying to take her away from me. That's not playing fair."

"Just a moment. The fact that I offered you a young lady to sit next to at dinner doesn't mean that I gave you an option on her of ninety-nine years."

"Very well. Now allow me to state *my* case. You're arguing in a casuistical manner which would have done credit to Ignatius de Loyola. The first part of the particular syllogism stands only by virtue of the intention behind it. The important thing in this case is what's in your mind. Do you remember saying to me in this very office 'Half a loaf is better than no bread?' By that you meant that you'd allow me *carte blanche* after dinner."

"Very well. And I reply that your reading of my words is an offensive one. Am I then a trafficker in human flesh! Who must furnish titbits for his guests? As you know, I'm no prude, and nothing much shocks me. But at least I haven't come down to being a procurer!"

"Boris, don't exaggerate. If all dinner parties were slave markets then every host and hostess in every capital of the world would be breaking the law. Why this *volte face*? Why this air of tragedy queen all of a sudden?"

"Well, Paolo, let's get down to brass tacks. What exactly are you driving at?"

"Just this. The Baroness de Mauchamp attracts me. I want to see her again. I'm asking you to retire from the course."

"In other words—a free field for Paolo Borgial!"

"Precisely. You know I've never trespassed on *your* territory."

"You want sole rights on the Baroness?"

"Yes. Keep away. One day I'll allow you your revenge!"

"Unfortunately, I'm interested in her myself!"

"So what?"

"I see no reason to sacrifice myself!"

"Boris, an awful thing has happened! We're both interested in the same woman at the same time. We're playing for her, heads or tails!"

"That's it."

"This time, I'm seriously in love. It would be an insult to her to leave it entirely to a toss of the coin."

"I agree with you entirely. Besides, even if I lost, I wouldn't give her up."

"Well, it's a fight then!"

"As they say in the ring: let the better man win."

"No, no, you're making a mistake. This rivalry will spoil our partnership. We've never yet been up against each other over a woman. Our business will suffer from it."

"My dear boy, that's a matter of complete indifference to me."

"Very well then. But let me remind you. There's no Geneva Convention where love's concerned. Everything's allowed."

"Paolo, I've learnt to expect any dirty trick from you."

"Oh ho! Nasty words already!"

"No, merely forecasts for the future."

The two men were now definitely hostile. There was an unpleasant ring in their exchange of persiflage, which revealed at once the superficiality of their friendship. Boris, after his *tête-à-tête* lunch with Claudette, felt himself the stronger of the two, and ventured a thrust which he thought would wound Paolo in his tenderest spot:

"Incidentally, Paolo, you've no hope of winning this tournament!"

The Florentine was extremely vain and retorted:

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched, dear boy!"

Boris guffawed:

"Oh, very funny . . . very funny! Signor Commendatore is really too amusing for words! Paolo, a word of advice. Go straight off this evening and pay a call on Madame Adelina. She'll introduce you to a marvellous Senegalese who'll make you forget that the Baroness ever existed."

Paolo's monocle was once more tightly wedged underneath his bushy eyebrows. He'd had enough of this conversation.

"Thanks for the tip," he said. "When I've finished with the Senegalese, I'll make it my business to put you out of harm's way."

"Well, my dear boy, at least you'd better wait till after black-out hours," was Boris's final rejoinder.

IX

IT would have been foolish to try and assess Paolo Borgia's eccentric personality by the laws of ordinary decency and common morality. The plump Florentine, with his mannerisms and high falsetto voice, possibly genuinely descended from Alexander VI, did not fit in with every-day conceptions of good and evil. He had a house in the Avenue Foch, fronted by a large uncultivated garden; a white, single-storied stucco house, zig-zagged with dark wooden beams, a house which typified the Borgia mind.

Inside the house was a strange room which Paolo had dedicated to what he called his family archives. With infinite patience he had made an elaborate collection of everything which was in any way connected with his "hated" ancestor. For Paolo was a Narcissus of the first order. Intoxicated by his own intelligence as a pretty woman is intoxicated by her physical charms, he loved flaunting to the world proofs of the evil deeds of his papal forerunner. Escorting his guests into his library, which contained a complete catalogue of the crimes of Alexander VI, culled from Burckhardt's "Diarium" and the despatches of Justinian, Vatican ambassador to the most Serene Republic of Venice, he would declaim, "Gentlemen, here, assembled before you, is the whole accursed history of my illustrious ancestor. Peruse these books and you will find in them a true account of the sins of a man who was history's greatest racketeer, a man who con-

doned adultery, encouraged incest, despoiled the dead and imposed upon his enemies the fatal 'biberat calicem.' "

Then, like an amiable demon guiding a troupe of neopyhtes into the nethermost hell of his collections, Paolo would invite his guests into the adjoining room, the room in which he kept his poisons.

His fatuous conceit had led him to employ various toxicologists to concoct all kinds of death-dealing mixtures which he kept in phials behind glass cabinets. Drunk with his own verbosity he would declaim—by dint of constant repetition he knew the words by heart:

"Here, gentlemen, you see the various poisons employed by His Beatitude, my illustrious ancestor. I confess it without shame—he himself knew how to live well, and how to cause death. History has recorded the names of poisoners of both sexes who have attained a slight renown . . . the Malatestas, the Sforzas of Milan, the Marquise de Brinvilliers, la Voisin . . . ah, dear friend, these were mere amateurs, little bourgeois killers! My family's record wipes out even the recollection of their feeble arsenical dabblings. Alexander VI and Caesar Borgia never confused diplomacy with excommunication, nor mandragora with belladonna. They knew to a fraction how to mix sugar of lead . . . third phial from the left . . . *acqua tofana* . . . seventh phial on the right . . . yes, that's it, the one that looks like a gin fizz. They had a whole legion of chemists who worked in the Vatican cellars, preparing what they called, in their delightful terminology, 'The Liqueur of Succession,' 'Widow's Water' and 'Powder of Eternity.' "

Paolo would turn round, and with an upward gesture of the hand as though calling the heavens to witness, declaim in a flight of dramatic oratory:

"Ah, that exquisite age, when people died, not in an operating theatre at the hands of a careless surgeon, but by draining to the dregs a golden chalice containing hemlock, sublimate, antimony and nitrate of silver—the whole, of course, with the bouquet of an old Chianti of ruby tints. You'll see that mixture, by the way, there on the top shelf, phial number 22. Alas, my good friend, what a prosaic age is ours! The great ladies of the time of Louis XIV discussed the comforts and conveniences of life. My cousin, Caesar Borgia, a hundred and fifty years before, already knew everything about the alkaloids of putrefaction. No, no, I'm not joking! Do you realize what gave the Borgia poison its bouquet, its special flavour? I'll tell you . . . it's a historical fact. In those days they'd kill a pig and sprinkle its guts with arsenic. They'd let them rot, slowly, very slowly; then dry the putrid mass,

straining off the liquid which flowed from it. You can well imagine the potency of this delicious cocktail: gangrene 'cordon rouge' and arsenic 'chateau neuf du pape,' half-and-half, well-shaken . . . Effect guaranteed . . . death within twelve hours."

Paolo, encouraged by his visitor's bewildered looks, would press down the loud pedal, hard. Possessed by a fury of family pride he would continue his account of his hero's activities: "I think we'll all end by finding a sort of injection against Evil. Do you know, I've ceased to condemn my ancestor? How can we, with our little bourgeois standards of morality, with our little umbrellas, our little season-tickets in the Underground, and our little penny-halfpenny bus rides, condemn such a superman as Alexander? My ancestor was a product of his period, a period which knew not gentleness, nor scruples, nor remorse. Al Capone's followers, if ever they stopped for a moment to study history, would go green with envy to find that in the sixteenth century there existed a Pope who quite openly sold abbots' croziers, bishops' mitres, and cardinals' hats—who annulled Royal Marriages for the sum of 30,000 ducats, and poisoned his cardinals in order to confiscate their lands."



After his little set-to with Boris on the subject of the Baroness de Mauchamp, Paolo Borgia returned in a bad temper to his house in the Avenue Foch. Puffed up though he was with conceit, he could not but acknowledge his rival's moral ascendancy. He had to admit to himself that the Russian was his superior in distinction and force of character.

Moreover, Count Stolitzone's conquests were of a higher quality than those of Paolo. Paolo dazzled women of easy virtue, who were flattered by the courtship of a Pope's descendant, and forgot the physical repulsion which his fat, clammy flesh inspired in them. They swooned in contemplation of his ancestry. The more nervous of his victims would wake with a shudder—might there be poison in the morning *café au lait*? The more mercenary would make off with one of his rare editions and sell it for a profit to the nearest antiquarian bookseller.

Count Stolitzone's lady-friends were more distinguished. They did not fall for Boris to satisfy a morbid curiosity or a misplaced sense of pride. They liked him not only for his millions, his rank, his descent and his immense influence in the Far East, but also for himself. Boris, like all well-bred Slavs, felt no contempt for outcasts. It was his practice every year to pick up an occasional

prostitute and set her on her feet. These he called his secret good deeds. Sad-eyed street-walkers, middle-aged trollops panic-stricken at the spectre of approaching old age would occasionally touch his heart. He would then gratify himself, not to the extent of making honest women out of them, but at least of liberating them from the wretchedness of perpetual victimization.

But he preferred quality to quantity. He left Paolo to enjoy easy triumphs over night-club ladies, and dull, flat affairs with docile servant girls. Boris preferred women who, by their breeding or personality, showed themselves worthy of his attentions. While Paolo blundered from night-club to night-club like a great clumsy bat, Boris, more selective, arranged his various liaisons with delicacy and finesse.

On that evening, as we have said, Paolo returned home in an irritable frame of mind. Boris's attitude had surprised and pained him. Why should he refuse to allow him a free run where the Baroness was concerned? What extraordinary stubbornness! It was clear, however, that Boris had thrown down the gauntlet and challenged his enemy, so he must quickly find the Baroness and pursue his courtship in earnest.

But where was the Baroness?

It was baffling to think that he was courting a sort of ghost whom he had never seen since their first meeting. He refused to believe that she was to be found nowhere in Shanghai. It was all very well for her to have her mail sent to Amoy Road—she must have a residence of some kind! All his *billets-doux* had remained unanswered, so he must make enquiries. Boris had refused his help, so he must apply for aid to the *Captain* of the *taxi-girls*.

Having discovered her telephone number from the *Topaze*, he put through a call to Mrs. Hobson at Amoy Road. It was half-past six. Magali was in. She listened for about twenty minutes to Paolo's moaning voice, and then broke in: "Commendatore," she said, "you sound so very unhappy that I'm strongly tempted to help you in your quest."

"Oh, *Captain*, I implore you! Give me the Baroness's address."

"I might do even better than that!"

"How do you mean, better?"

"I might even arrange for you to meet her this evening!"

"What! You could really do that?"

"She might consent to come to the *Topaze* for an hour. The Baroness is not normally in the habit of visiting that sort of place, but out of friendship for me, and, who knows . . . possibly in order to see you . . .?"

A sound like the trumpets of Jericho echoed down the receiver. Paolo was shouting for joy at the other end of the line. He had

managed an appointment at ten o'clock that very evening with the Baroness de Mauchamp.

Magali returned to the bedroom to warn her daughter.

"Darling," she cried, laughing, "I've got a charming surprise for you. You're to have a glass of champagne this evening at the *Topaze* with Paolo Borgia."

Claudette made a wry face. "Oh, with the madman! How awful!"

"Child, listen to your mother. You know everything, I realize that. You've read and seen all there is to see . . . But your mother has had twenty years of practical experience, so her idea now is to play the fish on a slightly tighter line!"

"What! You mean Paolo?"

"No, Boris. Ercole told me that Boris wouldn't be in town to-night, so here's our chance to entice his rival. You see the idea? You're driving a carriage and pair. First you whip one horse and then the other, and by this means arrive post-haste at the goal. And don't forget, child, you are, and must always remain, the Veiled Lady, your soul an enigma, your past a closed book, and your address shrouded in mystery."



Paolo and Claudette were seated in a private box at the *Topaze*. From below came the sound of music and dancing. The *taxi-girls* were working away to the rhythm of the Tango like Siegfried beating out his sword to Wagnerian motifs. That evening Magali cut her daughter dead.

Paolo in dinner-jacket and Claudette in evening *décolleté* were engaged in a conversational hide-and-seek. Paolo was in transports of joy. Every time one of the Shanghai *beau monde* entered the dance-hall he longed to stand up and shout down at them:

"Hullo, you people on the ground floor . . . look at Paolo Borgia sitting *tête-à-tête* with the beautiful Baroness whom Boris Stoltzine thought was his own private property. To hell with my partner, my companion in arms, my rival. I've cut him out on his own ground. This lovely creature, whom you can't see from where you're standing, is none other than the Baroness de Mauchamp, the Veiled Lady of Shanghai. And, moreover, she's succumbed—as indeed everyone in the end succumbs—to the Borgia fascination."

Indeed Paolo was so overwhelmed with excitement that he had already crushed two enormous cigars between his fingers,

upset his glass of extra dry Bollinger, and thrown a wreath of roses round the waiter's neck. He gazed at Claudette with his dark, fish-like eyes as though he were trying to hypnotize her. His stare embarrassed her, and he kept pestering her with indiscreet questions.

"My dear," he said, "meeting a new woman is like exploring an unknown country. Its lakes, mountains, waterfalls and islets represent her little reticences, protests, affectations, hesitations and final surrender. What is your address?"

"I already told you to ask Boris."

"I could get it more easily from the *taxi-girl Captain*."

"But I've forbidden her to give it to you."

"Why?"

"Because there's a dark secret in my life."

"In that case why did you go to Amoy Road when I drove you back that night?"

"Because I'd arranged to meet a friend there who was to take me home."

"Do you really enjoy these silly little games?"

"They're not silly little games; they're a necessity in my life."

"Imposed upon you by some outside person?"

"Yes."

"But you're a widow, and still so young!"

"Have you never known widows find consolation elsewhere?"

"They don't find consolation elsewhere. They just make up for lost time."

"Put it that way if you like."

"Is it Boris?"

"Ask him yourself."

"He's as secretive as you are."

"Well, then, remember Arvers' sonnet: 'Shanghai has its secret, the widow her mystery.'"

"You're annoying me extremely."

"It does you no harm, you Italians with your facile emotions, to be ruffled from time to time."

"At least tell me your Christian name as a temporary sedative."

"My more intimate friends call me Loulette."

Paolo fell back in his chair in ecstasy, and chortled:

"Loulette!—charming, charming! Women's Christian names are like tinkling sleigh-bells tied to their hearts. 'Francesca' and 'Cunégonde,' for example, are as different as orchids and chicory; 'Totoche' and 'Dolores' as flannel and *crêpe de Chine*. Personally, I'm very sensitive, I might even say fastidious, to the harmony of Christian names. . . . On fine sunny days you'll be my Loulette; on rainy days my Loulèche; on stormy nights my Loule, and when

it snows, my Loulitchka. But you mustn't be surprised if from time to time, without rhyme or reason, I suddenly address you as Loulichon. You see, my moods vary. I'm sure you dislike monotony. I, too, for that matter. Monotony is the vine-pest of all attachments. Do you understand, Loulette! Love has never been static, always dynamic. It fuses, vibrates, short-circuits and connects up again with increased volume. Every woman who's loved me—and I can assure you they form a pretty gallery—has always asked me, 'Polo'—I allow my intimate friends to call me Polo—'you're never the same person for two minutes on end.' You probably want to know how I achieve these transformations. Ah, Loulette, that's the Borgia secret. Suppose to-night, for instance, I were to carry you off to bed! The animal in me would carve you in pieces, torture and murder you. To-morrow morning you'd find me a changed being, a cultured and brilliant talker. No more buffetings; instead, a gentle, well-turned epigram whispered into your pillow. The beast in me would have disappeared. No more bruises, no more stings of the lash—merely the gentle dew of Oscar Wildisms falling upon your fevered brow. Do you tire of listening to the conceits of your lover? Then Paolo caresses your body, for the senses have their grammar and the skin its syntax. Loulou, dearest—it's queer; at this moment I think of you quite simply as Loulou! . . . What was I saying? No, don't interrupt me. . . . I remember now. I wanted to ask if you and your late husband slept apart. You needn't answer. I can see from your face that you did. That reminds me of a witticism I once made to a friend. You're dying to hear it, aren't you? Well, I'll be kind and tell it you. I said to the lady in question, 'Bed is a battlefield; it's a mistake to sleep next to one's enemy.' Not bad, what? Incidentally, every woman has a different idea of bed. To the courtesan it's a kind of workshop; to a young girl it's like the cage of her dream, to the married woman its an ironing-board, to a divorced woman the sudden opening of prison gates and to an old maid a cemetery of buried regrets. Are you thirsty, Loulette? You look as though you wanted a drink."

"No, I was only yawning. I'm exhausted this evening."

Claudette put her cigarette-holder into her bag and said: "Commendatore, the audience is now over."

"Already? Very well then, I'll see you home."

"No. Remember, in a well-constructed play the same climax is never repeated."

"I'll follow you without your knowing."

"I'll take good care you don't, and I warn you, if you do follow me, you'll never see me again."

"Oh, how cruel you are!"

"I shall tell the *taxi-girl Captain* to keep an eye on you. You're not to leave this place for ten minutes."

"As you will, my loved one! Am I not your slave, Empress of Louliland?"

Claudette rose. Paolo made a dive for her hand, and covered it with passionate kisses. Claudette, managing at last to free herself, rushed downstairs. Passing her mother at the bar she whispered quickly in her ear:

"Look out. . . . Watch him . . . see he doesn't follow me!"

She disappeared into a taxi.

Magali got up, and prowled about outside the private box where her daughter had been sitting. Paolo, sunk in reverie, with an empty champagne bottle in front of him, caught sight of her and called out:

"*Captain!*"

Magali entered the box. "Oh, Commendatore," she said. "Has the Baroness already left you?"

"Yes, alas, she's flown! I'll give you fifty dollars for her address!"

"If someone made you promise on your honour not to do a thing, would you break your word for fifty dollars, Commendatore?"

"For fifty dollars? No, indeed. My word holds good up to five hundred thousand!"

"Have you that amount?"

"No."

"Very well then. I keep to my word."

"Never mind. I'll find out where she lives!"

"How? Will you have her followed?"

"No. I'll find out through Boris's Chinese girl."

Magali pretended not to understand. Paolo, pleased with his machiavellian tactics, patted his plump chest.

"I see the Baroness enjoys her little mysteries. Well, thank God for Flora Ying."

"Who's Flora Ying?"

"She's Boris's little Chinese friend. Just wait and see what happens when I tell her that Boris means to turn her down for Loulette!"

"Loulette? Who's Loulette?"

"Oh, I forgot. You don't know the Baroness's pet name. It's Loulette!"

Magali struggled hard not to laugh.

"What a sweet name!"

"When Flora Ying knows that I want to take Loulette away from Boris, she'll be only too glad to find me her address. Get me?"

"Commendatore, you've got a marvellous gift for intrigue!"

Paolo rose to his feet. With a fat, self-satisfied smirk on his face, he declaimed:

"Listen, dear lady. My ancestor, that wicked Pope, Alexander VI, used to say to his hired assassins, when he sent them off to stab his rivals: 'Gentlemen, strike well and hard! Death's appetite is better appeased when Love has kept him on tenterhooks.'"

X

THE tea-house which Mesdames Flora Ying and Chance Suprême honoured by their presence was situated in the Chinese quarter of the town, where the Cul de Chaudron crosses the Rue des Tisserands. Attached to the tea-house was a beauty-parlour, something after the American style, where for the sum of five taels these Chinese ladies could have their eyebrows plucked and for an extra three taels enjoy the luxury of a camellia-oil shampoo.

On a certain afternoon two of these ladies were lying side by side, stretched out on their backs on two hard divan beds, their necks yoked into waxed linen collars. They were Uncle Larry's wife, Kiwi, and Count Stolitzine's little friend, Flora. Madame Almond Blossom, the proprietress, and her head assistant, Madame Summer Twilight, were supervising operations. The faces of the two ladies had been fixed with white of egg, which must be allowed to dry before the process of cleaning could be performed.

Stretched out like two mummies in their sarcophagi, their hands folded over their little pale pink trousers, Kiwi and Flora were conversing out of the corners of their mouths, in the stilted, cautious manner of mutual loathing. Their meeting that day was the result of a long, carefully thought-out plan. Flora Ying had been cajoled into it by Paolo Borgia. He had addressed her in the following words:

"Child, your friend Boris is off on a new trail. He's fallen in love with a white woman. Actually, I've fallen for her myself. She's a danger to your future security, and it's in your own interest to help me win her affections."

Flora Ying's instincts had been aroused like a fox terrier on

the trail of his enemy the cat, and she realized that Borgia was in earnest. She had asked:

"Who is this woman?"

"The Baroness de Mauchamp. The woman you met at Boris's dinner party."

"What must I do?"

"You need only find out her address. Boris is obstinate and refuses to give it to me. I don't want to have her followed, for fear of annoying her and losing her for good. So it's up to you to wangle her address out of your beloved Boris. I shan't give you a present—your reward will be to have fended off the Baroness."

Flora Ying, after pondering for some time, had set Borgia a few questions of her own. Had he made enquiries at the smartest hotels? Yes, but without result. Had he written to the address in Amoy Road? Yes, but had received no answer. Finally Flora Ying had declared herself willing to do as she was asked. Unfortunately, however, Boris had refused to give away the secret.

While Paolo was grilling Flora Ying, Magali had had her claws in Madame Chance Suprême. Kiwi had not minced her words where Flora was concerned. She had called her a louse, a piece of dung, and, foulest epithet of all, the daughter of a tortoise. Magali, realizing that Paolo intended to question Flora Ying, hastily parried the blow by fanning the flame of Kiwi's spite. Knowing her passion for French perfume, Magali had dealt her out a fresh supply, and, in the course of conversation, said:

"Incidentally, Kiwi, if ever you want to get a rise out of your beloved Flora Ying, I know a way."

"Oh! What way is that?"

"Listen. Paolo Borgia has fallen in love with a certain Baroness de Mauchamp, a friend of my daughter, whom he met dining with Boris. The Baroness refused to give him her address because he bored her. Paolo thinks he can get her address from Flora."

"How can he get it from Flora?"

"Listen carefully, Kiwi. Flora boasted to Paolo that she had you in the palm of her hand. She said you were so frightened of her that you'd give her the address at once. She added something which I daren't even repeat to you."

"Oh yes, tell me, tell me!"

"No, my dear, I mustn't; I really mustn't!"

"Oh, please tell me, please!"

"Well—she said she'd tell all her Chinese friends that Larry had bought you at a reduced price after the Communist sacking of Canton in 1927, when you were employed as housemaid to a Japanese pearl merchant near the New Asia Building."

Magali had shot her dart with precision. Kiwi, maddened by

Flora Ying's little barbs of spite, had promised to lead her enemy up the garden-path. She had listened carefully to Magali's story, and was resolved to get her revenge at the first possible opportunity.

The opportunity had now arrived. The two ladies, lying side by side, their faces lacquered with the white of egg, opened fire with exquisite Chinese politeness.

"Dearest," said Flora Ying, gazing up at the ceiling, "have you ever heard mentioned the name of a Western widow woman, a new arrival in Shanghai. They say she's remarkably beautiful."

"Dearest, to whom exactly do you refer?"

"Dearest one, I dare not reveal her name to you."

"If it is your wish, I promise never to repeat her name to anyone."

"It is my wish. I thank you. She's called the Baroness de Moootootchamp."

"Is she French?"

"Yes, and very young. Eighteen years old."

"Ah! Now I know to whom you refer. Indeed, I know a great deal about the lady."

Flora Ying, forgetting the white of egg, turned her head in her excitement to hear what her neighbour had to say.

"But," said Kiwi, "what I tell you must go in at one ear and out at the other."

"Dearest one, may the evil spirits which haunt the Temple of the Golden Dragon cut me in ten thousand pieces if I reveal your secret!"

Motionless, her eyes staring at the ceiling as though she were spinning her web of lies to the sky, Kiwi spoke.

"Dearest one, the Baroness de Moootootchamp is a woman who in her short life has played a hundred different rôles. She lived in Persia when she was seventeen, and stabbed to death a woman who tried to take her fiancé from her."

Kiwi, revelling in Flora Ying's astonishment, continued, "Yes, my dear, you see the Baroness is not one of those good housewives who look after their children and pamper their husbands. She's a tigress who believes only in Love and Death. She either laughs or kills."

Flora Ying, in the faintest of whispers, put the fatal question: "Where does she live?"

Magali had planned Kiwi's answer in advance. Still lying motionless on her back, Kiwi replied:

"Dearest one, I know my curiosity is indefensible, but why are you so interested in the habitation of this lady from the West?"

"I wish to sell her one of my jade necklaces. She's probably one of those rich foreigners who'd give me a good price."

"Oh, so it's a business transaction?"

"Yes, dearest one."

"Well, dearest, fond as I am of you, I do not wish to see you any richer than you already are. Why do you not ask your Lord and Master Boris for the Baroness's address?"

"He has refused to give it to me."

"And why should you imagine that I would give it to you?"

"Because you would be rewarded for your graciousness."

"How?"

"I would give you a hundred dollars out of the sum I received for the necklace."

"In that case, dearest, your word is good enough for me. The Baroness lives in the Rue du Cardinal Mercier, number 1277."

"1277."

Flora Ying, to impress the number on her memory, traced it with her forefinger in the air. She was satisfied. Kiwi no less so. For the last ten minutes lies and deceit had been bandied to and fro. Flora Ying was convinced that she had hoodwinked her enemy with the story of the necklace. Kiwi was chuckling with joy at the thought that Flora Ying, who prided herself on her cunning wiles, would shortly be hurrying to Paolo Borgia, bearing the address not of the Baroness, but of a house of ill repute.



Every week the relationship between Boris and Paolo became more strained. They saw each other daily at the office, but when the evening hour of relaxation arrived, they no longer talked amicably together as in former days. Even Paolo's attempts at jocularity had fallen flat. He no longer challenged Boris in a tone of raillery:

"Well, caro mio, you're still hiding that precious little Baroness of yours."

And Boris had long ceased to make his usual retort:

"It's a foolish farmer who puts ferrets and chickens in the same coop!"

Never in their long partnership had a woman come between them as this one did. Never before had Paolo sulked for more than twenty-four hours at a stretch, never had Boris so obstinately refused to disclose to Paolo a promising address.

Mr. Pou, the manager, with his usual flair, sniffed a coming storm. One day, after the two partners had left their office, bowing to each other with distant politeness, and gone their separate ways, Mr. Pou went into the room of Mr. Li, the

accountant, and, shaking his head gravely, his two hands tucked into the wide sleeves of his black silk coat, announced in a serious tone:

"That female is certainly playing her cards well. If she were a pair of bellows, she couldn't kindle a better fire. Mr. Li, our betting games are over, I fear—that is, unless you're willing to give me even odds on the Man from the Steppes versus the Volcano Man."

"Have you ever set eyes on the woman in question?"

"No, but I understand the *taxi-girl Captain* at the *Topaze* introduced her to the boss. She's said to be a pretty piece of porcelain."

The Chinamen's conversation was interrupted by an unexpected noise which came from the room occupied by the two partners. Mr. Pou crept silently along the passage in his felt-soled slippers, and peered through a little patch of clear glass in the painted panel above the door. He was greatly surprised to see Paolo Borgia rummaging about among the papers on Boris's writing-table.

Mr. Pou, his eye glued to the glass, watched Paolo's movements like a lynx, wondering what on earth could be the reason for this search. Suddenly Paolo shouted in stentorian tones:

"Mr. Pou!"

The Chinaman waited a few moments, then knocked on the door and went in. Paolo beckoned him to approach.

"Mr. Pou," he said, "I'm going to ask you a question which in no way concerns the firm."

"Sir, I am at your service."

"In my partner's absence, have you ever received a telephone call from the Baroness de Mauchamp?"

"No, sir."

"Has she ever called here to see Count Stolitzone while I was out?"

"Never, sir."

"Thank you. You may go."

Mr. Pou bowed himself out of the room. Paolo, with an angry gesture, pulled his hat down over his forehead, and walked out on the quay. He was literally furious. His researches had led him nowhere. Pou knew nothing. Flora Ying, on whom he had built up all his hopes, had, with an air of great importance and mystery, handed him the address of a low brothel. The *taxi-girl Captain* still refused to break her word. Weeks had passed, and the Baroness de Mauchamp remained invisible. He reproached himself bitterly for not having followed her, that evening when they had met at the *Topaze*. Hailing a rickshaw, he told the man to

take him to the International Club. Entering the Bar, he was immediately greeted by Fernand Broutillon and Charles Appenzell.

"Hullo, Paolo" said the Swiss engineer. "How goes it?"

"Badly," said Paolo with a wry smile.

"You've got lines under your eyes. Too much dissipation!" said the banker.

"No, not dissipation, merely my usual headaches."

Appenzell seized him by the arm:

"Lap up an *old-fashioned*, and we'll take you somewhere to amuse you."

"Where?"

"To Mireille's. She's giving a picnic in her flat. Don't bother to change—it's quite informal. We'll stop at Wan's place on the way and buy some shrimps and bamboo shoots."

"And I'll provide the drink," said Broutillon.

"Very well," said Paolo, adding, with a majestic wave of the hand: "I'll supply the sweets. I don't mind betting your friend Mireille Dargens gargles with sugar; her writings are so acid."

The three men left the club, stopped at Wan's place in Fou Chow Road, and then proceeded to Mireille's flat, laden with their various purchases. Mireille lived on the twelfth floor of the Windsor Building, in the French Concession. She greeted them with peals of laughter. Madame Grace Ho, a pale, slight figure in her periwinkle silk dress, was making sandwiches, while the Marquise de Casa Mello, wearing a blue apron over her Lanvin coat and skirt and a twelve-carat diamond brooch, was scraping celery in the kitchenette.

The unexpected appearance of Paolo amused the women. All of them either hated him or were attracted to him. As the Casa Mello had once expressed it:

"Oh that Italian! I never know whether to offer him my mouth to kiss, or to knock him on the head with my umbrella."

During the sweet course, Mireille opened fire on Paolo. Putting her arm familiarly round his neck, she said:

"Well, little public poisoner, I hear it's *you* who've got a little pain in your heart for a change."

The conversation stopped, and an atmosphere of tension prevailed. Borgia, embarrassed, clapped his monocle to his eye, and looked round the table.

"Me? Me? Pain in my heart? What d'you mean?"

The Casa Mello joined in the attack.

"Don't put on those airs of innocence, Paolo querido. I know everything. See through you as easily as looking through a key-hole. Mireille, shall we tell his fortune for him?"

Paolo decided to take the whole thing as a joke.

"Bravissimo! I love astrology during meals. What do you foresee for me, children?"

Mireille will reveal your past. I'll foretell your future."

Mireille, the journalist, began crooning over Paolo as though she were lulling a baby to sleep.

"Our poor little Polopolo is suffering. He's suffering because that wicked Uncle Boris has taken his Baroness away from him. No more Baroness—Baroness flown far away. So our poor little Polopolo has a pain in his heart. No more running after little ladies!"

Paolo was chagrined. He hated to have his love-affairs made a mock of.

"Mireille, you're mad! What do I care about Boris's escapades?"

Mireille bounced the ball to the Casa Mello, who continued in a similar vein.

"Well, Paolo, so much the better. I needn't worry now about disclosing the future to you. Get ready with your congratulations. Your fascinating *amigo*, Boris, is engaged to the Baroness de Mauchamp."

Paolo's monocle fell into his coffee-cup. He gazed at Mireille dumbfounded. Then he burst into a shout of laughter.

"Do you realize you actually took me in? For three seconds I thought you were being serious!"

"You wait! My prophecy will be fulfilled in the near future."

"Come on now, Marquise, don't be so foolish!"

Mireille gazed pityingly at Paolo.

"No really, Polopolo? Are you honestly the only person in Shanghai who doesn't know about it? Listen to what the outside world is saying!"

She called to Charles Appenzell who was playing Mahjong with Grace Ho and Broutillon in the next room.

"Charles! What was the piece of news you heard this morning about Boris?"

"I heard he was going to be married again."

"And who was he going to marry?"

"The Baroness de Mauchamp. Why do you ask?"

"Because Paolo knew nothing about it."

"Well, of course, he wouldn't; business partners are like married couples. They deceive each other without the other knowing."

Paolo was not a little mortified by the proofs thus put before him, a wave of anger slowly mounted within him and he hated the note of mockery that seemed to prevail among the company. If he was the only person in Shanghai who knew nothing about it, then indeed their jeers were justified. He gave a loud guffaw to conceal his growing annoyance. Wiping his monocle, he said:

"Upon my honour, darlings, I know little and care less about Boris's affairs."

"What? He hides things from you?"

"I thought you two partners shared your profits and your women!"

"Never mind, Paolo dear, you'll get your revenge next time."

"I very much hope you'll be his best man!"

Paolo almost collapsed under this fire of ridicule. For the first time he seemed to lose his self-assurance. He tried to make witty retorts, but they fizzled out like damp Catherine wheels. He tried laughing it off, but his attempts at jollity sounded painful, like the grinding of gears. The two women went on mercilessly baiting their victim. They had a feeling of having caught this great Italian in a noose, as he sat there between them on the sofa, and this feeling gave them infinite sadistic pleasure. Mireille Dargens had built up a little reputation for herself in Paris by writing spiteful articles, taking advantage of her sex to avoid attack. As she pretended to grow younger each year, never admitting her real age, a dramatist had once said to her, "My dear Mireille, you should make a very good house-wife."—"Why?" she had asked. "Because you economize on everything—even on your age." The Casa Mello was equally sabre-toothed. Not that she had any literary pretensions, but she cultivated her natural tendency to cynicism like a hot-house plant. Moreover, it was *such* fun baiting the bull—so exciting rubbing salt into Paolo's wounded feelings.

"If I were you," went on Mireille in a voice of assumed innocence, "I should start straightaway looking for a suitable wedding present. After all, just think! Your dear friend Boris is going to be married, and I think you ought to give him a set of silver carving knives."

"Paolo, if I were you I'd give the Baroness a gold pencil-case, so that she can write down any appointments she may make with you later on."

"No, darling, I disagree there. Polopolo needn't give the bride anything. I think he'd better give Boris a set of Buffalo horns for his library."

Paolo had had enough. He refused to be victimized any longer. Looking his two neighbours straight in the eyes, he raised his voice and launched his counter-offensive.

"Well, sweethearts, you've had your little fun now. *Finita la comedia*. If you *really* want to know the truth, I'll tell you. I knew the whole story a week ago. For the simple reason that I'm the man who shunted the Baroness into Boris's arms!"

Mireille and the Casa Mello looked slightly taken aback. They said:

"No Paolo, you're pretending."

"We're not deceived, Polopolo."

"He's just paying us back in our own coin."

Paolo lit a cigarette, rolling it between his fingers like an army corporal, and replied:

"All right, darlings. We all know you're both as sharp as needles. But just ponder a moment. D'you think it likely that I, for years Boris's most intimate friend, should be unaware of what's in the mouths of all those great asses in the Hammam Baths, in the Club or at the hairdressers? For pity's sake, use a little common sense."

The Casa Mello sighed.

"Oh dear, this awful Italian's been deceiving us all the time!"

"D'you really think he has?" echoed Mireille.

Paolo smiled condescendingly; he wasn't going to press his advantage too far.

"Sweet creatures; I adore you both. Fancy having the nerve to tease me like that! You enjoyed your little game, didn't you?"

Seeing themselves defeated, Mireille and the Marquise nestled up close to Paolo on the sofa, begging him to tell them the latest details and the whole secret history of this marriage, which was bound to create a sensation in Shanghai.

"We're quits now, Polopolo. But tell us please, how did you bring the marriage off?"

"As easy as winking."

"Yes, but how?"

"How does one usually bring a man and a woman together?"

The Casa Mello threw Paolo a sly, sidelong glance from half-closed eyes.

"Why, one marries her a little oneself!"

"Precisely!"

"Paolo, really, your behaviour!"

"You won't repeat that, will you?"

"Boris suspects nothing?"

"No, nothing, poor fellow! It's he who's paying the piper." And with superb caddishness he added: "It's not the first time he's been palmed off with my old clothes."

Towards midnight the conversation began to die down. Paolo leapt into his car and drove home by himself. Thank God the frivolities were over, and he had time and leisure to reflect.

He slipped on his black silk dressing-gown and went into the bedroom. Beside his bed stood a silver crucifix between two lighted candles, the whole framed in heavy, dark red velvet hangings. Whenever Paolo was disturbed in mind, he would

kneel before this improvised altar and mutter a prayer, calling Providence to his aid. Having now performed this rite, he lit a cigarette and started pacing up and down the room, thinking hard.

He had certainly succeeded in putting those gossiping women in their place, but their story had nevertheless upset him. If it was really the case that all Shanghai was talking about Boris and the Baroness, there was probably some truth at the bottom of it. No smoke without fire. Boris must have cleverly concealed his activities, and during the past weeks made lightning progress in his courtship of the lovely widow.

Paolo never took his business defeats greatly to heart. But defeats in the sphere of love enraged him. Boris was now his bitter enemy. His behaviour had been outrageous. That pent-up anger which obsesses even one's innermost thoughts was slowly but surely mastering him. If Boris did actually marry the Baroness, Paolo would sooner or later get his revenge. He didn't yet know how, but, as far as he was concerned, it was written in the great book of Fate.

He poured himself out a large glass of iced water and went to bed. Suddenly the telephone rang, and a woman's voice echoed into the receiver.

"Hullo, hullo; was our dear Commendatore asleep?"

"No. Who's speaking?"

"It's Mireille. Dear Polopolo, I only wanted to say how sorry I was about this evening."

"Sorry, darling? Why should you be sorry?"

"For trying to fool you about this marriage business. You realize it was only one of the Casa Mello's silly ideas! And it's so funny to think that we'd accidentally hit the nail right on the head when you told us the truth about it all."

Mireille's words had a marvellously comforting effect on Paolo. He answered her gaily:

"Mireille, you adorable creature! Of course you're forgiven! And, may I add, I've never spent such a pleasant evening in my life. You're the best hostess in the world. And if Charles Appenzell hadn't got certain rights over you, I'd have long before now. . . ."

"What! Poisoned me? Thanks very much, old dear! You're really too complimentary! Now good night, and sleep well."

Mireille hung up. Paolo smiled happily to himself. His *joie de vivre* had suddenly returned. He made a little niche in his two pillows in which to rest his precious head. Hardly had he pulled the blankets over his chin than the telephone bell rang once more. Stretching out his arm, he lifted the receiver, and said jokingly:

"Our little muse can't tear herself away from her Polopolo? Is there something she's forgotten to tell me?"

But this time it was a man's voice which rang in Paolo's ear: "Is it you, Borgia? Forgive me interrupting your conversation with the pretty muse . . ."

Paolo recognized the voice of Boris. Surprised by this late call (Boris hardly ever rang up at night), he answered:

"No, you're not interrupting me. What's the matter? Bad news from Hongkong or what?"

"No, no. It's not a business matter. I only wanted to tell you a piece of news. I thought I'd let you know before you saw the announcement in to-morrow's *Shanghai Times*. I'm engaged."

Paolo's voice lost its carefree note and became hard and hostile.

"Oh? Who to?"

"The Baroness de Mauchamp."

"Many congratulations."

"Thanks. I know how to appreciate them. The Baroness is with me now, and asks me to send you her best regards."

"When is the wedding?"

"Next Tuesday."

"I shall have already left for Hongkong by then."

"That's why I chose that date. Everyone will know the reason for your absence and why you couldn't be a witness. Well good night, my friend. We'll leave business affairs until to-morrow."

XI

BORIS'S marriage to Claudette had caused a sensation in Shanghai. In spite of the threat of a European war, in spite of the danger of fresh Nippon atrocities, Shanghai society was still interested in gossip and tittle tattle. The air was full of conjectures and surmises. People talked in the Cathay Bar, in the grill-room of the Metropole, in the International Bar of the Bund, in the billiards-room of the French Club, and in the night-clubs and brothels of the town.

The excitement was even greater than it would ordinarily have been were not the Baroness de Mauchamp a complete stranger. Who was this ravishing young widow? Where had Boris found her? Was he really in love with her? The women were sad to think

that their millionaire Don Juan had at last decided to settle down. The men considered that the lovely widow was worth the sacrifice.

Their honeymoon had been a short one. They had spent a week in Hang-Chow, in the neighbouring province of Che-Kiang. Claudette, arm-in-arm with her husband, had gazed in wonder at the great smiling Buddha in the Monastery of Pure Compassion, at the Pagoda of the Autumn Moon, and at the Lake of the Dancing Fish. Every evening they dined *tête-à-tête* in the *Yamen* of one of Boris's mandarin friends. It was indeed a strange setting for the honeymoon of an innocent girl of eighteen, fighting her first battle under the colours of an experienced campaigner, twenty-two years older than herself.

In the car which brought them back to Shanghai, armed with all the necessary Nippon visas, Boris hugged his wife to him contentedly. He had enjoyed their short trip together. Claudette had surprised and delighted him both by her inexperience and by her desire to learn. He had initiated her authoritatively into the joys of fulfilled love.

"Claudette," he said, "it's a shame that business calls me back. But we'll continue our honeymoon in Shanghai."

"I hope so, Boris."

"We'll make love in my little *Trianon* in the Avenue Joffre. I'll caress you like the little downy dove you are."

"You know I'm your slave, Boris."

"And *you* know that I adore you!"

When they came in sight of the French Concession, Claudette turned the conversation on to a delicate subject. She was frightened even to mention the matter, but it concerned her so deeply that she overcame her qualms and said:

"Boris, dear, what have you decided to do about Mrs. Hobson?"

"Well, Claudette, would you hate to be separated from your friend?"

"Frankly, yes. I would."

"Well then, we'll say no more about it."

Half an hour later, the car drew up in front of Boris's house. As Claudette entered the hall, the servants bowed low before her, acknowledging their new mistress. Opening the door of her own little private sitting-room, she was thrilled to see her mother sitting there, calmly awaiting her arrival. Boris smiled, enjoying the look of delight upon Claudette's face.

"There's a pleasant surprise for you, my little dove. You said you wanted your friend Magali near at hand, and here she is. She couldn't be nearer to you because I've invited her to stay on here as a permanent guest."

Satisfied with the sensation he had produced, Boris departed, leaving the women alone.



Magali quickly locked the door, so that their *tête-à-tête* should not be interrupted. She listened spell-bound to her daughter's story. Her own pride of achievement was increased by her daughter's obvious happiness. Finally, having heard all from beginning to end, she clapped her hands with excitement and cried out:

"Well, Countess! Has Madame Mère played her cards well or not?"

"Darling, you deserve a first-class degree in military strategy."

"Just think of those agonies of despair we used to go through at Uncle Larry's! What a precipitous path we've had to follow!"

"Mother, it makes me dizzy even to think of it."

"Take care, Claudette. Get out of the habit of calling me 'Mother' in this house. Don't ever give yourself away. You've got to learn to call me Magali. Don't forget!"

"No, Magali, I won't."

"Well, what about your anti-Boris prejudices?"

"They've vanished."

"And your dreams of happiness?"

"He's brought them to life."

"You're thoroughly in love with him—admit it!"

"I admit it."

"Thank heavens! I can now breathe freely. But you certainly played me up pretty nastily at times, you know!"

"Forget it, Mother—I mean Magali! Your daughter's now the Countess Stolitine. In future she'll be wearing the jewel that once belonged to Catherine the Great. You've always wanted to see me famous, respected, worshipped in society—well, you've achieved it! And now darling, give me a kiss."

Mother and daughter hugged each other affectionately. They then rang the bell and ordered tea. Claudette, for her part, was curious to know what had been happening in Shanghai during her absence.

"Ah, my little poppet, you're longing for me to tell you that you've been the sole topic of conversation in the town. Well, I can satisfy you on that point. Since you've been away in Hangchow, all Shanghai's been in a state of nervous tension."

"What about?"

"Waiting for an outburst of fireworks between Boris and Paolo."

"Where is that silly old Borgia?"

"In Hongkong. He's not expected back for three weeks."

"I'm beginning to dread his return already."

"Why? What's there to worry about? Your husband can defend himself!"

"Listen, Mother . . ."

"Call me Magali, will you?"

"I'm sorry. I *always* forget! Are you sure there's nothing to be feared from that little rat of a man who forged that passport for us under the name of Baroness Claudette de Mauchamp?"

"Nothing whatever. Thank goodness, he's made a sudden get-away to Bombay. The police were after him. So we needn't worry about that."

"I can't help feeling it's rather wrong to marry under a false name. It's like putting margarine on the market as fresh butter."

"Claudette, in the first place I won't have you calling yourself margarine. In the second place, I can't see how a label can make any difference to my daughter's true worth and personal good qualities. In the third place, working as I've done at the *Topaze*, I couldn't with any decency marry off my daughter to Count Stolitine. A personal friend of mine, a Baroness, yes. That's quite different!"

"All the same, Magali, from the strictly ethical point of view, it's not right, you know!"

"You annoy me with your 'strictly ethical points of view'! Boris is a very lucky man. Entirely owing to me, he's found the woman of his choice. Also entirely owing to me *you* are happy and settled. So for heaven's sake child, do stop splitting hairs!"

"Very well, Mother!"

"Wretch! *Will* you remember to call me Magali!"

"Yes, Mother, I'll try very hard."

"What on earth do you think would happen if you were to call me 'Mother' in front of Boris?"

"So it's really true that he's invited you to stay here permanently?"

"Yes. He's an adorable creature! He wrote to me from Hangchow, begging me to leave the *Topaze* and come and live here, keeping it a secret from you so as to give you a pleasant surprise on your return. He said in his letter, 'You can act as paid companion to my charming Countess. You'll be able to chaperone her while I'm away.'"

"Magali, it really does make me feel rather ashamed to be playing this dirty trick on him!"

"Oh, child, it was only a simple little ruse. It's all over now, and we've reached our haven of rest."

"I hate to think we've reached it under false colours. If I were superstitious, I'd feel some evil were to follow from it."

"Claudette, will you be quiet! Here's a piece of wood! Go on, touch it!"

Claudette touched it as a matter of principle. Magali went on: "Of course it's obvious we're in an abnormal situation. But isn't life becoming more and more abnormal every day? Here's China fighting Japan without any formal declaration of war. There's Europe in a state of nervous tension about Germany. And you still persist in regarding our harmless little comedy as an enormous tragedy? You love your husband, and he's as happy as a king. Who, if anyone, has the right to complain? Why me, of course, who's acting as paid companion to her own daughter. But I don't mind. I ask nothing better. My life's dream is fulfilled. I've got you married to the richest and best-looking man in Shanghai. The rest can go hang!"

"And Uncle Larry? Can we really trust him?"

"Let me once again remind you of what Uncle Larry said on your wedding night. He said 'Magali, if Claudette marries the boss, even under a false name, d'you think I'd go and tell him that she's your daughter and my niece? I don't like scandal any more than you do.' And he was serious when he said that. It's just as much to his interest to keep quiet as it is to ours."

"Very well then. Our only danger is Kiwi. She knows everything."

"Yes, she knows everything. But we've got two trump cards where she's concerned. Firstly, you're married and no longer a danger in Larry's house; secondly, Boris will now no longer need his Flora Ying. You know how Kiwi detests that Flora Ying! The thought of her being wiped off the map will throw Kiwi into ecstasies."

"Well, Magali, to sum it all up, how do we actually stand?"

"Countess, I see nothing but good in store for us. Go on with your honeymoon, darling, and pray all the Buddhas in Asia to protect us."

Claudette put her arm affectionately round her mother's waist and said laughingly:

"Magali, my Boris is really very attractive! Come on, admit it!"

"He's marvellous! Those wonderful dark eyes, that physique, that 'allure.' Have you noticed how gentle his hands are?"

"Well, hang it all, he *is* my husband!"

"Yes, yes of course! How silly I am! I still can't believe the miracle's actually happened. Come on now, darling. In my

capacity as paid companion I'm going to show you to your rooms."



Claudette's honeymoon, which had been interrupted in Hang-Chow, was continued at the *Petit Trianon*. It was an unusual pleasure for Boris to have under his roof a pretty, docile young wife, who was at the same time intelligent and witty. They hardly ever went out in the evenings. The devil had temporarily become a monk. He was quite happy dining at home, seated between Magali and Claudette. From time to time he would bring back a pleasant surprise for Claudette, in the shape of some jewel or trinket. Like a spoilt child, Claudette would jump up and throw her arms round her husband's neck, while Boris laughed indulgently at her excitement.

Magali, for her part, was thankful to be relieved of her arduous duties at the *Topaze*. She could now devote time to improving her appearance. It could in truth be said that Shanghai, which was accustomed to most things, had rarely seen a 'paid companion' of such grace and refinement. Boris, with these two lovely creatures at his beck and call, strutted about like a proud, contented peacock.

On the morning of July 30th, Paolo Borgia returned from Hongkong, and by midday was already back in his office in the Bund. Mr. Pou, the business manager, bowed before him with his usual respect, but now there was a glint of malice in his eye. He had stopped gambling with the accountant. The love-affairs of his two bosses were no longer worth the risk of a single sapeke. For the first time, Stolitzine and Borgia had been rivals, and Boris had stolen Paolo's lady. Mr. Pou, that cunning fox, scented a drama, and kept his change carefully in his pocket.

Seated at his desk, Paolo questioned Mr. Pou about his partner's activities. Mr. Pou was expecting the Count back at half-past one. Paolo sat and waited.

Boris put in his appearance, at one o'clock. He welcomed Paolo with the high spirits of a happy man. For some time they sat together discussing matters of business. Then Paolo said:

"I'm distressed not to have been able to offer my congratulations to Countess Stolitzine."

"You'll soon have the chance, dear boy—that is, unless the sight of Claudette married spoils your appetite."

"Oh, I've had three weeks to recover!"

"It hasn't been too painful?"

"Of course not, dear boy. Don't be foolish! In life one has to be

a good loser. One can't *always* win, either at poker or on the pillow. Without wishing to intrude into your private affairs, may I ask what has become of the . . . er . . . Baroness de Mauchamp's friend? I beg your pardon, how stupid I am! I mean your wife's friend."

"Magali Hobson?"

"Yes. Is she still working at the *Topaze*?"

"No. I've taken her on as paid companion to my wife. She lives with us."

"Oh, I see! So by marrying you've acquired two beauties—the budding flower *and* the autumn rose!"

Boris laughed.

"Still the same old poet, I perceive!"

"And you, still the same old Casanova! She's very attractive, you know, that ex-Captain of the *taxi-girls*."

"I suppose she is, really, now I come to think of it."

"Don't talk as though I were Christopher Columbus discovering America! There'll be plenty of jealous people in Shanghai, you know!"

"Oh, I'm accustomed to that. Well now, will you come and dine with us next week?"

"Not *quite* so soon, Boris. Give the wound a little longer to heal."

When Boris got home that night, he found his wife playing gin-rummy with Magali. He stood silently watching them in the doorway, and Paolo's remark came back to his mind. 'The budding flower and the autumn rose.' Certainly his wife and her companion made a charming picture, Claudette's youthful grace, and Magali's dark beauty, her hair dressed in the style of 1900, like a portrait by Boldini.

Both women turned to him with the same question on their lips:

"Well, and how was Borgia?"

"He's returned, children, and asked me to pay Claudette his respects."

"Was there no scene between you?"

"No. Perfect mutual understanding."

Magali said:

"Don't you think that's rather odd—rather suspicious?"

"Yes, very suspicious. I never thought Borgia could be such a good loser. He's not the kind of man to say 'After you, dear boy,' where a woman's concerned."

"Well, what's to be done, Boris?"

"Oh, it's a matter of no consequence; forget it!"

That afternoon, when Boris and Claudette were having tea

with the English Consul-General, Magali, seated in her daughter's private room, had leisure to reflect.

She saw quite clearly that Paolo Borgia constituted a real danger for herself and Claudette. Uncle Larry they could trust. Kiwi they need not fear, because she owed a debt of gratitude to Claudette for marrying Boris and thus being the means of discomfiting her rival, Flora Ying. But the vindictive Italian was something really to worry about. Magali, with her usual perspicacity, realized that the mean-minded Italian would do his best to upset the apple-cart. Using machiavellian tactics, he would seize the first opportunity for revenge.



On September 3rd, 1939, news reached Shanghai of the two declarations of war, England at eleven in the morning, and France at five in the afternoon.

At once groups of people began to assemble in the International Bar, feverishly awaiting further news. Shanghai's oldest inhabitants began to reminisce about the Boxer Expedition in 1900 under the command of Marshal Waldersee. The middle-aged recalled the years 1914-18, the occupation by the Japanese of the German colony of Kiao-Tchow, the Marne, Verdun, and the armistice celebrations at the French Consulate. The young men wondered anxiously how this fresh European struggle would affect them. What side would the Japanese take? How would they react to the breaking of the Treaty of Danzig? A corridor must either be open or closed, joked the more cheerful. The gloomier foresaw disaster. Over their whiskies and sodas they railed against the democracies.

"France and England declaring war against the Nazi monster!" they said. "It's like trying to frighten an ogre with an umbrella. The democracies are unprepared; we're courting defeat! They should have allowed Germany to take what she wanted from Poland, to give us a year's time to prepare. But to cry halt to Germany, with one 'plane against fifty, and one tank against a hundred! It's sheer lunacy! The youth of France and England have been drugged with pacifistic ideas for the last twenty years! One begins to wonder whether the Parliamentary system means handing over the direction of affairs to dreamers and incompetent idiots." The Fascist-minded among the company said, "Gentlemen, you're defeatists!" The pessimists replied, "Gentlemen, you're already going over to the enemy!"

For the next month, Boris and Paolo, thoroughly taken up with

business affairs, signed a temporary truce in their own private war.

Their business had been built up on a double-dealing basis which precluded any idea of patriotic feelings. Paolo was as little concerned with Matteotti as he was with Mussolini.

Boris, who by reason of his birth, should have been a supporter of the Tsarist régime, had no qualms about flirting with Red Russia when it suited his interests to do so. The opportunism of both partners was flagrantly cynical. Money was good, no matter who provided it. Boris was helping to re-equip Chiang Kai Shek's army in Chung-king. Paolo dealt secretly in opium because it was in the interest of the Japanese High Command to spread the drug throughout the territories they had occupied. The Japanese Samurais turned a blind eye on Boris's dealings with China because he passed on to his confederate information which was of use to them.

The two accomplices thus found it to their advantage to walk on a tight-rope, balanced equally between espionage and the transaction of business. Their office was a sort of neutral territory, like Switzerland. A black market of information. They were playing a dangerous game, for the fortunes of both depended upon what government was in power.



Months passed. The war of nerves continued throughout Europe. France slept in the mistaken conviction that she would never be invaded. Like a senile, short-sighted old lady, pottering about the garden of her villa, blissfully unaware that there were gangsters all around, the French Government continued to reassure its people that they were well defended by the Maginot line, ignoring the fact that the Belgian frontier lay open to the invader. The great military leaders of the last war, who, with a few exceptions, had learnt nothing new about the art of warfare since the days of 1914, looked on bewildered at the manœuvres of tanks and armoured divisions, and at the new methods of aerial combat. They had already forgotten their scorn of a certain young infantry officer, who, six years previously, had exactly foreseen and described the nature of the war to come. While Europe, not yet enslaved, was enjoying its last hours of liberty, Boris and Paolo waxed fat and prosperous. Wars concerned them no more than the blood corpuscles in the body of a dead Papuan. With an entirely cynical indifference to the sufferings of Western civilization, they continued to ply their successful trade.

XII

TWO years had now elapsed, and Magali was still carrying on her duties as paid companion to her daughter in the *Petit Trianon*. Never once had an unguarded word passed the lips of either mother or daughter.

Claudette's honeymoon had lasted long. For months on end Boris had spoilt her, flattered her and showered her with gifts. She was one of the most admired young ladies in Shanghai. Diplomatic birds of passage who came to dine with Boris, went away enchanted by the grace and freshness of the new Countess Stolitzine.

Claudette, her former fears allayed, gave herself up to sheer enjoyment. She was in love with Boris. His business travels necessitated long and frequent separations. But she resigned herself to these, confident in her husband's love. She herself, an exemplary wife, never went out in his absence with other men.

Magali, seeing her daughter courted and fêted everywhere, was content to remain in the background, basking in the reflected glory of her daughter's triumphs. Boris never failed in his attentiveness to her, and she felt a profound affection for her son-in-law. Occasionally she would say mischievously to Claudette:

"Oh, child, if I were ten years younger and you were not my Claudette, ha, ha!"

"Magali, what d'you mean by that ridiculous ha, ha? What do you mean?"

"I know what I mean."

"You mean you'd fall for Boris yourself?"

"Perhaps. . . !"

And they laughed hilariously as though it were a good joke.

The days passed; peaceful, sunny days spent in the park of the *Petit Trianon*. Magali could see no cloud on the horizon. After two years' silence, Uncle Larry would now for ever hold his peace. Kiwi had also been discreet, because Boris had hustled Flora Ying out of his house. As for Paolo, surely two years of self-restraint proved that he had become reconciled to the situation.

It was now the autumn of 1941. Boris's business affairs necessitated more and more frequent periods of absence. Claudette, as much in love as ever, endured these partings without complaint.

One September afternoon Magali had gone down to the "Jade

Market" to buy some knick-knacks. She returned home delighted with her purchases, having found a signet ring engraved with the word "MAGALI" in Chinese lettering. Bursting into her daughter's sitting-room, she was amazed to find Claudette lying full-length on the sofa, her head buried in the cushions, weeping bitter tears. The thought at once crossed her mind: 'There's been an accident!'

"Darling, for Heaven's sake, what's the matter—what's happened?" she cried.

Brushing aside her tears Claudette told her:

"Mother, you thought Boris was in Sou-Chow. So did I. He wasn't due back until this afternoon. Well, I've discovered that he was here yesterday! Boris has been unfaithful to me. I had proof of it last night. I tried not to tell you, but couldn't keep it back any longer. Actually, I've noticed a slight coolness in his behaviour to me for the last two months. Oh, nothing much, of course—just little things here and there which only a wife would notice. I put it down to tiredness after his long journeys to Chung-king and back. Well, it appears I was deluding myself. He's taken up with her again."

"With whom?"

"With Flora Ying."

"Don't be silly, Claudette. Flora Ying left Shanghai *ages ago*!"

"She's come back!"

"How do you know?"

"I saw her. I also saw Boris coming out of her house."

"When?"

"Last night."

"You told me you were going to the cinema with a friend!"

Claudette gave her mother a long account of her movements the previous evening. Prompted by suspicion, she had gone out to spy on her husband at the French Club. Crouching back against the cushions of the car so as not to be seen, she had watched him come out, drive off to the Avenue Foch, and stop outside the villa which he had rented for his Chinese friend. Claudette had spent hours prowling about in the garden, watching the play of lights behind the windows of the house, and, hidden between two spindle trees, had seen him come out at about eleven with Flora Ying, who accompanied him to the gate, where they had exchanged a last fond embrace. Claudette added in a rage:

"And she kisses like a European, damn her!"

Magali suddenly began to look anxious. Boris's infidelities in themselves were of much less consequence than the fact that he had patched up his quarrel with Flora Ying. All sorts of complications might arise from this reconciliation.

She tried to soothe her daughter's wounded feelings.

"Listen, darling," she said; "there's an unwritten code which applies to all white women who marry in Asia. Husbands nearly always have little affairs with native girls. They don't matter. The wives regard them merely as exhibitions of masculine curiosity, forgive and forget them. The flesh is weak, and no man's a saint. I used to have the same trouble with your poor father in Saigon. Poor darling! it's not such a terrible tragedy, after all! You're only twenty, so you're inclined to make a drama out of nothing."

"Mother, I'd agree with you if it was only a question of that Chinese girl. But there's something more. This afternoon, while Boris was out, I went and had a good look around his bedroom. In the pocket of his white evening jacket I found a torn piece of menu card with the words "Sonia—Central 4657" scribbled in pencil on it."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I immediately rang up Central 4657 and pretended to be his secretary speaking from the office. First a Chinese woman's voice answered, and then some Russian female with a very pronounced accent. I said 'Madam, it's Count Stolitzine's secretary speaking. He wishes to know whether you are free to dine with him at the *Topaze* next Thursday!' The woman answered, 'Tell Count Stolitzine that I'll be only too delighted; that I'm so impatient, I simply can't wait!' She spoke as though she were already whirling ecstatically in Boris's arms. So you see, Mother, I know now what to expect. A Chinese *and* a Russian, and God knows who besides! Boris doesn't love me any more. . . . I'm already an object of ridicule! My husband's weary of me after two years!' Claudette dabbed her swollen eyes, and cried out, "Oh dear, life's too awful!"

Magali used all her powers of persuasion to try and calm her daughter. She was determined to be cheerful at all costs; to exercise a kind of disciplined optimism. "Don't be silly," she said. "Of course your husband loves you. He's just going through a phase of independence. He *needed* relaxation. He'll return to you more in love than ever. He'll never really love anyone but you."

Claudette listened without much conviction. Magali ended her exhortation with the words:

"And don't, for heaven's sake, tell Boris anything about your discoveries. That would be the most ghastly mistake. Emotional scenes never bring the wandering sheep to the fold. Believe me, it's a temporary crisis which won't last. Remember what old Uncle Casimir at Nîmes used to say: 'When misfortune comes my

way, it only puts my back up.' So keep your pecker up, like old Uncle Casimir. The clouds will soon disperse, and everything will be sunny again."



Magali was definitely upset by her daughter's disclosures, and especially by the news that Flora Ying was back in favour. Little Kiwi would soon get to hear of this. Then the cat would be well and truly out of the bag.

That evening Claudette complained of a headache, and went early to bed. Boris, having nothing better to do, suggested a game of Mahjong with Magali. Magali seized the opportunity to turn the conversation on to the topic which concerned her most.

The game was finished, and they were putting the Mahjong set away, when Magali said suddenly:

"Boris, I thought it was all over between you and Flora Ying!"

Boris, taken aback, tried to laugh it off:

"Well, well! So Mrs. Sherlock Holmes thinks she knows a thing or two!"

"My dear Boris! You're too much of an Asiatic not to realize that in Shanghai news travels faster than sound! No, but seriously, you've had a little passage with her again, haven't you?"

"What a silly joke!"

"No secrets from Magali, please. Magali sees everything, knows everything, and repeats nothing."

She put on her most seductive smile, and the susceptible Boris fell at once. Looking her straight in the eye, he said in an undertone:

"It's incredible! You've got the gift of second sight."

"How naughty of you to be unfaithful to that sweet, trusting little wife of yours!"

"Oh, really! It can't be called infidelity with a Chinese girl!"

"And what about the others?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The non-Chinese girls. Can't these be called infidelities?"

Boris was staggered to discover how much Magali knew. Watching him closely, she saw that he was in doubt whether to speak out or not. She gave him a gentle push:

"Boris! If you haven't yet realized that I'm a confidante in a million, then you're not as intelligent as I thought you. Haven't I given you a hundred proofs of my discretion?"

"Yes. I must admit you have."

"Well then—just between ourselves . . . why have you suddenly gone off the rails in these last months?"

The Mahjong game was over. Boris took Magali's hand, and led her to the sofa. They sat down side by side. He lit a cigarette.

"You ask me why? You might as well ask an untrained dog why he constantly rushes off after a fresh scent!"

"Always the love of the chase in spite of the quality of the prey which the law has given to you. You've the loveliest possible creature living here with you in your house, always at your beck and call!"

"I may occasionally go a-roving, as the poet says, but that doesn't prevent me loving my wife."

"I see. So it's really only a question of varying the menu every now and then?"

"Absolutely. It's difficult to reform a forty-four-year-old Casanova. Preachers and moralists irritate me with their doctrines of perpetual faithfulness. I don't go so far as to say that the more unfaithful one is, the more one loves one's wife. But I do maintain that the loveliest woman in the world lacks certain things that you can get from other women."

"What d'you get from these other women?"

"Something negative—just novelty. They needn't be prettier nor more skilful in the arts of love. It's just that they're different, that's all."

"Yes, Boris. I know all that boring nonsense. From the masculine, egotistic point of view it's perhaps understandable. But Boris, you're no longer alone in the world—you're two of you together. Claudette, though young, is neither stupid nor *gauche*. Whereas you, blinded by conceit, can't see beyond your nose, I, a simple paid companion—have a clearer vision. So let me warn you: Claudette's got an uneasy feeling about you. She's beginning to suffer from your pranks."

"I haven't noticed anything!"

"No, but I, her companion and confidante, *have* noticed things. I warn you, Boris, you'd better stop, unless you want to break a heart which doesn't deserve to be broken."

Boris had been lounging back in the sofa, watching the smoke curl upwards from his cigarette. At this point he suddenly turned round and stared at Magali. What was the reason for this sudden outburst? Why was she giving him this moral lecture?

"Did my wife ask you to speak to me like this on her behalf?"

"No, no, Boris. Don't for heaven's sake say anything to her about it. It was my idea entirely. You see, you've been away so often and for such long periods. I know it's your business that keeps you away, but I also know that your business affairs are a kind of loophole of escape for you. They entitle you to freedom of

movement. My dear, it's an old trick, first invented by the Greek Agamemnon."

"Very well; now I'll be frank with *you*. You want the plain, unvarnished truth. Well, you shall have it. I'm still deeply attached to Claudette, but this eternal honeymoon at the *Petit Trianon* has begun to get on my nerves."

"Oh, Boris!"

"Well, I can't help it. Whipped cream is delicious now and then, but not at *every* meal."

"I do beg you, Boris—get back your taste for family life with Claudette, and *don't* make her wretched!"

"You say that with such feeling! Why are you so deeply concerned about your friend's happiness?"

"I love her almost as though she were my daughter."

"You're too young to play a mother's rôle, you know!"

Magali, flattered by this remark, blushed involuntarily. She took a look at herself in the long mirror opposite the sofa. Boris put his arm familiarly through hers, leaning over to see their reflections mirrored together.

"Aren't I right?" he said. "Just look at yourself, Magali. Thirty-three! You don't look a day older. Look at that fresh, amber skin of yours, those charming French eyes . . . I can just picture you with a flowering olive-branch in your arms, standing in the doorway of a little French farmhouse framed with cypress trees. You recall so vividly to my mind the few months I once spent in Avignon. What a heavenly place! You make me think of Daudet, Mistral, Gounod, of all the happy, pleasant things in this delightful world of ours."

Carried away by his own eloquence, Boris started caressing Magali's bare shoulder with his gentle fingers. She suddenly felt herself grow dizzy under the spell of his talk. It was so long now since anyone had paid her compliments. Boris edged away a little to get a better view of her, still holding her by the arm.

"A moment ago you were advising me to return to family life," continued Boris, in a careless, free-and-easy tone. "Well, Magali, do you realize there's only one person who could make me do it, and that's you?"

Magali gave a violent start. For a moment she remained speechless, gazing at Boris in a state of complete bewilderment. She was seeing him for the first time in a new light. He continued in the most natural tone in the world, hinting things which horrified his listener, but which seemed to him quite natural.

"It's true, Magali! You're the woman who could bring this miracle to pass. I've lost my taste for sitting at home in the evenings as I used to. But you could bring the wild bird home to roost.

It's been in my mind before now, you know—just one of those fancies that flit across one's brain from time to time. I've watched you sometimes crossing the hall—I've smelt the scent of your hair in the passage—I've heard your lovely clear voice calling Claudette in the gallery above, and my unconscious mind has spoken out, quite crudely and straightforwardly as it always does: 'Oh, that Magali . . . ! One day I'll fall violently in love with her; I can see it coming!' Till now my daily routine has prevented me speaking my thoughts aloud. Now, quite by chance, the mask of self-deception has been removed. So you see, Magali—I'm speaking quite frankly to you now—we'd hit it off very well together, you and I."

All the time he spoke, Boris continued gently stroking Magali's bare arm. She liked the touch of his fingers, yet was ashamed to find herself responding to his advances. Boris's words acted upon her like a heady wine.

Then, suddenly, as though brought to her senses by a violent douche of cold water, she jumped to her feet, with a horrified look upon her face, crying out:

"You're mad, Boris! Don't ever repeat what you've said to me to-night." The note of terror in her voice quite startled Boris. He said:

"Really, Magali, you make me feel like a criminal, as though I'd committed some impious act. Surely there are limits to women's friendships for each other."

"For God's sake stop making obscene proposals to me in your wife's house. It's frightful!"

"Don't exaggerate. I know there's a deep bond of affection between you and Claudette. But after all, you owe her nothing more than the pleasure of your company. In life it's everyone for himself, dearest. . . . Claudette hasn't put you on your oath in any way. When all's said and done, you did the Baroness de Mauchamp a great service by introducing her to me. Now it's time you thought of yourself, for a change. That is, unless, to put it crudely, you're disgusted at the idea of our friendship becoming something more than friendship. Frankly, Magali, do I repel you physically?"

"What on earth should make you think that?"

"Thank you! That's all I wanted to know. So it doesn't irritate you when I stroke your arm?"

"Of course not! How foolish you are!"

"Good! Then let's be logical. A moment ago you said to me, 'Come back and live at home, and make Claudette happy!' My reply to that is, 'Yes, of course I will. I'll come at once if *you'll* be nice to me. It's all so simple!"

"Your logic is frightful! The remedy would be worse than the disease!"

"In fact, you refuse to sacrifice yourself for Claudette's happiness?"

"Please, please don't say such horrible things!"

"Magali, you're beyond my comprehension. Or else you don't understand plain speaking."

"Of course I understand it. In plain, straightforward English you're asking me to be your mistress."

"Is that an insult, coming from a man who's fallen in love with you?"

"Boris, stop it, for heaven's sake!"

"You're actually blushing! Magali, I adore you. There are still some unsuspected virginal streaks in your character."

"You don't understand!"

"On the contrary. I understand perfectly. Your unwillingness to deceive Claudette only makes me like and respect you more. Not to mention my desire for you, which seems to increase in proportion to my regard."

Boris drew Magali closer to him on the sofa, holding her in a strong embrace. The smell of her hair intoxicated him. He whispered in a low voice:

"Listen, Magali. We're not children. We're both experienced in life. We know how mutual understandings suddenly spring up between two individuals, and we can enjoy a sudden uprush of passion. I've wanted you for months, without even knowing it. You've got everything that most appeals to me, from the colour of your skin to the violence of your temperament. When you decide to unleash that pack of hounds, what a glorious and furious hunt there'll be!"

Boris once more lowered his voice, as though imparting some dreadful secret:

"Magali, I swear this to you. The hunting dog to which I referred a moment ago would gladly overcome his hunting instincts for your sake. D'you know what that means? It means that I see in you the woman I've searched for all my life; the woman of temperament and the intelligent companion. Mistress and friend in one. . . . I've watched you now for two years; I've observed your discernment and capacity for sound judgment. For two years you've been the vestal virgin of my household; now, you've only to give one sign, and you can become the power behind the throne!"

Magali was enchanted by Boris's words, spoken so gently and with such sincerity. She felt suddenly relaxed and happy, as though she were lying in a warm, scented bath. Her previous

state of nervous tension, of strung-up resistance, vanished under Boris's persuasive eloquence. All moral scruples had left her. In Boris's arms she had no strength or desire to resist.

Suddenly, with unbelievable energy, she sprang to her feet, pushing him away from her in terror. She was pale as death.

"Boris . . . I . . . I must leave this house! I'll go to-morrow! Yes! It's the only thing to do. Let me go now. I must go to my room! Leave me!"

She walked backwards towards the door, her eyes wide with horror as though she feared he might hold her back by sheer force, or she herself succumb to another attack of giddiness.

Boris, satisfied by her sudden, passionate response, watched her retreating figure in silence. He gave her a parting smile of gratitude, the smile of a man who understands the true implication of a woman's submission and subsequent revolt. He smiled at the thought of that sudden, momentary union which bound them inevitably to secrecy and future collusion.

XIII

THAT night was for Magali a night of torment. Alone in her room, she paced up and down, clenching and unclenching her hands. When Magali was roused, she had to keep moving all the time. She was not one of those who could lie quietly in a *chaise-longue* and reflect. She tramped up and down the room, from the door to the window.

Suddenly she found herself face to face with a monstrous reality. Had she been a devout Catholic and believed in the inevitable expiation of sin, she would have seen the finger of God in this first consequence of her deceitfulness. She was already paying the price of her lies and treachery.

That night, under the roof of the *Petit Trianon*, slept two creatures dear to her, Claudette at one end of the passage, Boris at the other, who lay calmly awaiting her decision.

Magali had rushed out of the drawing-room that evening with the despairing cry, "I'll leave this house to-morrow." But what excuse could she give to Claudette for going? Claudette would be amazed to see her flying desperately from the comfort of this happy and luxurious home where she had lived for two years in

peace and contentment. She would be bound to suspect some dramatic scene. Magali searched her mind in vain for some excuse to offer Claudette.

It was two o'clock in the morning. Magali stopped her tramping, and looked out of the window. Her room was dimly lit by a little bedside lamp. She could see across the park to where the Chinese pavilions and the stone dragons by the little lake gleamed in the moonlight. She gazed abstractedly at the armed night-watchman going his rounds through the park. Magali, her forehead pressed against the window-pane, finally made up her mind: "I shall not leave to-morrow!"

But to remain on was no real solution. The problem rose up again like a spectre, more threatening than before. Boris, the typical seducer, had selfishly refused to make any sacrifice. He had cynically offered his ultimatum: "Claudette's happiness will be assured on condition that Magali consents."

For the hundred millionth time in the history of mankind there had arisen the problem of the eternal triangle. But this time, horror piled upon horror, it was not the wife's best friend, but her own mother who was the cause! Magali moaned aloud. The situation might not have been quite so desperate had she been Boris's mistress to start with. There had been plenty of cases in her experience where mothers had married off their daughters to their lovers in order to keep them close at hand. But the problem in this case was different. And the worst thought of all, the thought that would torment her conscience most, was that to all appearances she was remaining at the *Petit Trianon* out of selfless devotion to her daughter.

Fate, taking a malicious pleasure in acting the hypocrite, whispered in her ear, "Don't be impetuous; wait before you give Boris a definite refusal. Remember, your daughter will suffer if Boris turns indifferent to her. The marriage for which you worked so hard, Claudette's rank, position, social prestige, etc., will come tumbling to the ground. Boris, in his annoyance, will begin more and more to neglect Claudette, and look elsewhere for amusement. Claudette, for her part, will leave him and marry someone else. With one stroke of the hand she'll overthrow the whole structure you've so carefully built up. So be very cautious! Don't refuse Boris outright in an access of righteous rage. If you consent to his demands—he's very much in love with you, you know—you'll spare Claudette much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Boris, happy in your arms, will become once more an exemplary husband. So any conscientious qualms which you may suffer, will be counted as another sacrifice to your daughter's happiness."

And Fate added these final words:

"Besides, the sacrifice won't be so very painful, because you know, in your heart of hearts, that you're in love with Boris already!"

Magali suddenly whipped round, fancying that some mephistophelian ghost, standing behind her, had actually whispered these words into her ear.

Protestations of innocence rose to her lips, as though she were already in the dock before a jury of honest folk, who looked at her in silent reproach. It was as though she were already standing in the witness-box, facing the public prosecutor.

"No, no! Don't accuse me of being in love with my son-in-law. The moment I saw him I knew he was the man for Claudette. No other thought ever entered my head! Their wedding-day was for me the acme of bliss—no cloud dimmed my happiness. He's undeniably attractive, I know. He's got everything. But not for me, not for me. The wicked sacrilege of taking my own daughter's husband! Why, it never occurred to me! It's a monstrous ideal!"

While Magali's brain was inventing these imaginary excuses, her heart was telling her a very different story. Beads of sweat stood out upon her forehead.

"Nevertheless, Magali," spoke her inner mind, "this sacrilegious idea that appears so monstrous to you, will haunt you day and night, however much you may try to suppress it."

Magali sank on to the bed in a state of complete exhaustion. Her eyes searched the room to make sure she was alone, that there was no witness to her mental torture. She was in the horrible state of suspecting her own motives. Had she not already begun, in the deeper layers of her mind, to find excuses for remaining in the house? Was she not clinging to fallacious arguments like a rascally attorney searching for loopholes to evade the true interpretation of the law?

In her case, unfortunately, these arguments concerned the moral, not the penal code. She kept trying to persuade herself that her momentary surrender to Boris was a punishment inflicted on her by Providence to atone for her double-dealing; that she was being forced, against her will, to endure his compulsory love-making.

For hours this new idea possessed her. Yes; that was it. She was being victimized by a wicked man, or at least by a cowardly seducer who followed his own impulses, regardless of right or wrong. Boris was taking advantage of the situation because he did not believe in a mother's capacity to endure anything for her daughter's sake. Rarely had a man used such low methods to gratify his lusts.

Magali, to justify her conduct, began picturing herself as an

afflicted soul, brow-beaten by a cruel bully, forced to endure his loathsome advances. But when she actually tried to imagine the sacrifice that lay before her she could not but admit that it would be a very responsive victim who shuddered in the arms of this sinister Don Juan!

It was now seven in the morning. A grey, cloudy dawn was rising over Shanghai. The tramping feet of a patrol of French police sounded along the Avenue Joffre. The siren from a Japanese cargo-boat weighing anchor in the Wang-Poo echoed its mournful wail.

For the last hour Magali had been lying comatose upon her bed. She awoke with a start to see the cold light of dawn slowly penetrating into her room. She took two aspirins, bathed her eyes in lotion, and sat down at the dressing-table to comb her dishevelled hair. On the table was a sheaf of white lilies, a photograph of Claudette as a bride, smiling and radiant.

Suddenly she heard the handle of her bedroom door being very gently turned. Someone was trying to enter the room without disturbing her. Magali quickly drew together the open folds of her dressing-gown. Turning half-round in her chair, she sat awaiting the intruder.

Involuntarily she cried out:

"No . . . don't come in!"

It was her daughter standing in the doorway.



Claudette was quite taken aback by her mother's peremptory tone, and by her haggard looks.

Coming into the room, she whispered:

"Mother, what on earth's the matter?"

Magali tried to recover her poise. She answered:

"Oh, it's you, child. I thought it was Wang."

Claudette closed the door behind her.

"Mother, darling, you look as though you hadn't slept."

"I've been awake the whole night with a splitting headache. And you, child? Why this early morning visit?"

"I didn't sleep, either."

"Why not? Are you ill?"

"No. I've just been turning over and over in my mind what we discussed yesterday."

"You mean about . . ." Magali dared not even mention Boris by name. She said: "You mean about him?"

"Yes."

Magali's heart began to beat violently. She made room for Claudette on the seat beside her at the dressing-table. She dreaded to hear what her daughter would say, yet longed to know her innermost thoughts.

Claudette spoke in a calm voice.

"Mother," she said, "I'm very unhappy. Boris has adored and spoilt me for two years. I thought this happiness would last for ever. But I see now that I was living in a fool's paradise. I've come to ask your advice. Tell me, when a woman realizes that her husband's being unfaithful to her and starts going out every night, what does she do. Either she takes a lover, or she endures the situation stoically, believing it'll all come right in the end. Personally, I've no inclination to go slyly out in quest of a lover, so the best thing I can do is to leave him. Oh, I shan't make any scenes—I'll just say good-bye in a friendly way. I'll say, 'Boris, I see you don't care for me any more, so let's separate and remain good friends.'"

"You mean you'll ask for a divorce?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Having found out after two years that your husband loves you a little less than he did before, you immediately jump to the conclusion that the only solution is divorce?"

"Yes, that's the way I look at it."

"Listen, child: you're Countess Stolitzine. You're married to the richest and most respected man in Shanghai, a man whose ancestry dates from Catherine the Great. He married you for love; he's shown you constant kindness and attention. He's made you the most envied woman in the town. Just because his ardour has begun to cool, you say to yourself that all is lost. My poor child! If every wife thought as you do, only five per cent. of marriages would last at all."

"But Mother . . ."

"Child, let me give you the benefit of my experience for once. First of all, consider the practical consequences of divorce. As you know, we haven't got a single penny to our names. I've already raised a loan on what the Asiatic Oil Company owes us. So there's nothing to hope for in that direction. Suppose you say to Boris, 'We'll separate.' Knowing him as I do, I realize his personal pride would be offended. We're not living in America, where you could be sure of obtaining a separation allowance. He'd merely answer, 'All right, Claudette—if you don't like me any more, I'm ready to give you your freedom—we'll get divorced and you can go your own way.' Even if he were to give you a generous allowance, we should still be insecure. With the threat of war increasing every day, two unprotected Europeans stranded

in Asia would find themselves in a very unpleasant situation. Can you see yourself quite alone, with your money supplies rapidly dwindling, running the gauntlet between Saigon and Peking? Use your imagination! Just think what it would mean! Leaving the practical question aside, let's consider the emotional problem. When all's said and done, what crime has Boris actually committed? He's had a little *rapprochement* with his Chinese mistress. Well, he'll soon get bored with her. He's made a pass at a Russian woman whom he met quite by accident. Well, what about it?"

"You think that means nothing at all?"

"At any rate it's not sufficient reason to break up what was once a perfect marriage. Claudette, take my advice. Don't seek impossibilities. We're in a tight spot, and we can't afford to let our feelings run away with us."

"Well, what's to be done?"

"Take it all calmly, darling. Boris is going through a phase. It won't last."

Claudette sat for a while in silence. Finally she sighed:

"Mother, if I take your advice, it'll be for your sake. You're quite right. We can't afford to be too exacting. We're living happily together in this house, and I should never forgive myself if I spoil things for you."

"And you've got yourself to consider, too. Our life's no pipe-dream. It's becoming harder and more uncertain every day."

"Very well, Mother. I'll say nothing to Boris."

Magali put her arm round her daughter's neck, and kissed her.

"You'll see. Everything will come right in the end. I'm convinced that once this cloud has passed over, you'll be as cheerful as ever you were before."

Kissing her daughter again and again, Magali said fervently:

"Darling, I want so terribly to see you happy!"



Paolo Borgia, on learning that his partner and former companion-in-arms was to marry Claudette, had suffered the deepest and most cruel disappointment. His vanity wounded, his pride brought low, he had nevertheless managed to grin at his triumphant enemy. But it was a grin which ill-concealed the terrible bitterness in his heart; a forced, ugly grin, behind which his resentment grew steadily greater.

When he met Boris on his return from his honeymoon in Hangchow, Paolo, as suave and friendly in his manner as before, planned to get his revenge. Was he, the great Paolo Borgia, that triumphant seducer who had never yet failed in his courtship of a woman, to allow himself to be scorned by Claudette as a dull nonentity? Would he admit defeat? Never.

Stubborn as a mule, cunning as the slyest fox, he lay, to all intents and purposes, quiet for a while. His relations with Boris were courteous and polite, nothing more. In their offices at the Bund, they no longer exchanged confidences as in the past. Boris had given up asking Paolo to dinner. They no longer mentioned Claudette or Magali. Paolo seemed to have forgotten their existence.

Actually he was waiting for the first opportunity to strike a blow. The opportunity came with Flora Ying's return to favour. When he discovered that she was back again in her little villa in the Avenue Foch, Paolo decided to pay a call on Flora Ying.

The young Chinese had never been guilty of infidelity to Boris with his friends. As a native of Canton, bought for a high price and respectably housed by a man of rank, she was forced to keep up appearances. She could not allow herself to behave in an undignified manner like a *New Asia Taxi-girl* or a second-hand concubine. But for Borgia she entertained a certain regard—was he not the descendant of a Great Mandarin of the Catholic Faith? In her eyes the Pope was a sort of Lama, and the Vatican a monastery of white-skinned priests. Paolo, descended from this High Priest, enjoyed in her eyes almost as much prestige as Boris, whose ancestor had been favoured by an Empress's caresses.

When Paolo called that afternoon at the Avenue Foch, bearing in his arms a white cardboard box containing American rouge, lip-stick, powder and face cream, Flora Ying welcomed him with great delight. After the usual ceremonial of the cup of tea, Paolo congratulated her on her reconciliation with Boris. Looking at her knowingly, he said:

"So our friend Boris's home-life is breaking up!"

Flora Ying fluttered her little white hands upwards in a gesture which seemed to say:

"My Lord and Master wanders where his fancy takes him!"

"I know . . . I know. We white people get to know things almost as soon as you Chinese ladies."

Flora Ying gave a tiny piercing laugh like the tinkling of a little copper bell. Coyly adjusting the open slit of her silken dress, which revealed a little too much of her leg up to her

thigh, she delicately lifted her cup of tea to her lips, and said:

"I would never have believed my Lord and Master would commit himself with a paid servant."

Paolo pricked up his ears. To whom was Flora alluding? He knew that backstair flirtations were not to Boris's taste. Had he engaged a maidservant at the *Petit Trianon*, or what? He replied:

"Why not, Flora dear. It's a well-known fact that the Emperor Kien Long in the Tsing dynasty carefully selected the maids of honour who were to wait on his noble lady."

"Virgins of fourteen, yes. But not women of forty summers."

Paolo suddenly saw daylight. Fascinated by the idea of a love-affair between Boris and Magali, he was determined to get more precise information.

"You forget, my dear, that we Europeans do not despise women of forty. After all, it's easier to worship the kindly spirits in a temple consecrated by long usage!"

The simile brought a smile to Flora's lips:

"Paolo, there's the wisdom of ten thousand years in that head of yours."

"No, but I've had thirty-five years of practical experience."

"To return to the question of Boris. I think it's undignified for a man whose ancestor enjoyed an Empress's favours to behave in such a manner . . . To do it with his wife's paid companion . . . That, to my mind, is unsavoury."

"I've also heard about Boris's strange vagaries. But we've got no proof of it."

"But we have!"

"What proof have we?"

Proud to be able to recount the results of her little spyings, Flora Ying told Paolo that she had had spicy details from Wang, number three boy at the *Petit Trianon*. Wang had told Flora Ying's laundry maid that he had seen the Seigneur Stolitzine one evening in a close *tête-à-tête* with Madame's *amah*. Silent and invisible in the far corner of the room, Wang had watched, without grasping its implication, the scene between Boris and Magali on the sofa. He had not understood their words, but had surprised them in an act which interested him deeply, sitting side by side in a close embrace, kissing each other passionately on the lips. If Seigneur Stolitzine allowed himself to indulge in these horizontal intimacies on a sofa, it was easy to conclude that he performed the same operations in the privacy of his bedchamber.

At last Paolo rose and took his leave, exhorting Flora Ying to

keep him informed about the most intimate details of Boris's private life. He got back into his car, feeling that he had not wasted his time. He was already casting over in his mind various means of turning to account the information that Flora Ying had given him.

XIV

SINCE the Japanese occupation, life in Shanghai had been one long history of assassinations, attempted revolts, mysterious murders, conspiracies hatched by the faithful supporters of the Chinese Commander-in-Chief in Chung-king, against the collaborationists, opportunists, and traitors bribed by money from the Mikado's treasury.

One morning you would read in your newspaper that an agent of Chiang Kai Shek had been assassinated in some alley off the Avenue Edward VII, and the body deposited in the neighbouring field. The following week a story would appear of Chinese patriots waylaying one of Hirohito's spies and strangling him in a sampan, under the noses of the Japanese sentries posted on the Garden Bridge. Then again, some *sing-song* girl, mistress of a corrupt Chinese general, bearing the romantic name of Melle Lute Under the Moon would be found dead with a knife between her shoulder-blades.

The white people of the Concessions, weary of these various sensational stories, pursued their usual life of social intrigue. These "incidents" had ceased to hold their attention. Only the more pessimistic foresaw the coming conflict between the Nippons and the U.S.A. and, scenting a storm, started to pack their bags.

Boris and Paolo were no pessimists, but they were well-informed. They were a nicely assorted team, a kind of two-faced monster, one watching developments in Chung-king in the West, the other casting sly eyes at Tokyo's activities in the East. They had at their fingers' ends the thousand and one intrigues of Chinese politics, from the long-forgotten rivalries of Mr. Hou Han Min with Mr. Wang-Ching-Wei, before the latter had bartered his soul to the enemy, to the latest dramatic developments in the Municipal Council of the International Concession.

Boris and Paolo had sold munitions to the rebels of Foukien,

had wisely refused credit to the financially unsound General Ma at Sin-Kiang; had been hand in glove with the Christianized General Fou Yu Siang, the man who once baptized his soldiers *en masse* with a stirrup pump and was now about to retire into a monastery to study philosophy; they had acted as legal advisers to the son of Marshal Tchang-Tso-Ling; had found mistresses for the sexually depraved, money for the corrupt, opium for neurasthenics and phoney decorations for the ambitious. Boris and Paolo, rivals in love, were irretrievably yoked by years of double-dealing, compromise and secret acts of blackmail and illicit trading.

But underneath the apparent truce which enabled them smoothly to carry on their business, an element of discord was smouldering. Boris was a happy man, so it was not he who fanned the flame. It was the thwarted Paolo who was secretly hiding his weapon of revenge.

It was a peaceful sunny September afternoon. Boris had dictated his correspondence, lounging in his office chair with the air of a self-satisfied Pasha. Since his midnight *tête-à-tête* with Magali, he felt sure of ultimate success with her. Her state of nervous agitation, her obvious fear of being left with him alone, proved that she was troubled in mind, that she would eventually yield to temptation. Boris metaphorically licked his lips in anticipation. As a man of the world he looked forward to her imminent fall from grace. He felt more and more attracted towards Magali, and wondered why it had not occurred to him earlier to try his luck with her.

Paolo left the office and called at the French Club, where he had an engagement to play Badminton with Charles Appenzell. Having finished his game, he took a cold shower, later sauntered into the bar to join Ferdinand Broutillon, who was drinking cocktails with the Casa Mello and Mireille Dargens. The two women took a malicious pleasure in baiting Paolo. The *beau monde* of Shanghai looked upon Paolo as the beaten man in a sort of medieval tournament, where the prize had been the Baroness de Mauchamp. So they never tired of rubbing salt into Paolo's open wound by commenting on Boris's marital felicity.

Seeing Paolo approach, the Casa Mello nudged Mireille with her elbow, and said:

"Well, well! Here's our poor old friend Paolo! He doesn't look too bright. He's worn and unhappy. It's his partner's peaceful married life which has deflated him."

Paolo sat down and called for another round of drinks. Broutillon gave him a hearty thump on the back.

"Well, old Commendatore? Beginning to recover at last, eh?"

"Recover from what?"

"From Boris's happiness. It's a long time since the wedding, you know, and the turtle doves are still cooing away at the *Petit Trianon*."

Paolo suddenly chortled, and his eyes lit up with malignant glee.

"Your weather-gauge needs repairing, old boy. I understand there's a small cloud on the horizon there."

Excitedly the two women leant across the table.

"Has Countess Stolitzine gone off with someone?"

"Let's hear the whole thing, word for word!"

Paolo, becoming more and more expansive as the drinks began to take effect, said:

"Countess Stolitzine has a rival."

"What's her name? Tell us, quick!"

"I'll give you a hundred guesses."

"The Chinese girl, Flora Ying."

"Oh, no; she doesn't count."

"Well then, I'll bet it's Madame Jennelon."

"No really, Mireille, that's silly. Madame Jennelon has halitosis."

"How d'you know?"

"I had an affair with her dentist. If I remember correctly, it's Mrs. Dennwyn, the fascinating Australian. She picks up men like a kangaroo, and stuffs them in her pouch."

Paolo interrupted the Marquise:

"'Querida,' you're on the wrong track altogether. Boris is quite openly sleeping with his wife's paid companion."

"Good God!"

Mireille, Appenzell, Broutillon and the Casa Mello gazed at one another open-mouthed while Paolo, delighted at the effect he had produced, continued in a loud voice:

"It's the plain truth, darlings. Boris is now Mrs. Hobson's lover. The *Petit Trianon*'s the home of the latest triangle in Shanghai."

Broutillon and Appenzell's laughter suddenly froze on their faces. Looking up, they had observed Boris silently approach their table. Neither they, nor the women, nor Paolo, who had his back to the door, had seen him enter the room. Boris had heard the end of their conversation. There was a hushed silence, a tenseness in the air as when in a theatre, the villain approaches, knife in hand.

Boris came to within reach of where Paolo was sitting. Looking him straight in the eye he said:

"Borgia . . . will you repeat what you said just now in front of these ladies and gentlemen?"

Paolo, caught off his guard, began to stammer. He saw the stern look in the Russian's eyes. Boris said again:

"Are you frightened of repeating in front of me what you said a moment ago?"

"Me frightened? Why should I be frightened?"

"Come on then. I'm waiting."

"I told the simple truth, that you were having an affair with your wife's companion."

"It's a lie!"

And before Appenzell and Broutillon could interfere, Boris struck Paolo a violent blow on the mouth. Instantly there was an uproar in the bar. All the club members rose to their feet, and everyone began shouting. But above the din could be heard Boris's harsh, challenging voice:

"And if you're not a coward I'll expect you to send your seconds to call on me to-morrow morning."



The next day, at ten o'clock, two visitors called at the *Petit Trianon*, and asked for a private interview with Count Stolitzine.

Boris received them in the library, bowing gravely. The elder of the two visitors was M. Cesare d'Accosta, a retired consul, whose main interest in life seemed to be settling affairs of honour between gentlemen. The other was a M. Miguel Olivera, one of Paolo's personal friends, whom Boris had met once or twice at night-clubs.

M. Cesare d'Accosta was the first to speak.

"Count Stolitzine," he said, "we've come to represent our friend, the Commendatore Paolo Borgia. The gentleman in question, publicly and gravely insulted by you, last night, in the French Club, demands redress by arms, the usual procedure in such circumstances."

"Gentlemen," said Boris with his most cynical smile, "you're already an hour late. I was about to telephone your principal to tell him I had another couple of blows in store for him if you didn't soon put in an appearance."

"Count Stolitzine," said M. d'Accosta stiffly. "This is no joking matter."

"Very well," said Boris. "I'll put you in touch with my own seconds, Colonel Koutsnietzoff and M. Berrenger. You'll find them waiting for you at the Hotel Metropole at eleven o'clock."

Paolo's representatives bowed and left the room. An hour later, they were ushered into Colonel Koutsnietzoff's apartments at the

Metropole. The four men began discussing the conditions of the duel. M. Cesare d'Accosta, a skeleton of a man, with the profile of a melancholy eagle, took a sadistic pleasure, where duelling was concerned, in painting the situation in the gloomiest light, in magnifying the graveness of the insult, and in exacting the most frightful conditions. Miguel Olivera, a jolly soul who took nothing very seriously, and hated bangs and explosions, formed a striking contrast to his friend. His creed was that no woman was worth a sword-thrust, and that the best way to patch up a quarrel was to drown it in a magnum of champagne.

But it was M. d'Accosta, in his capacity as chief witness, who led the proceedings. Addressing Colonel Koutsnietzoff, he said:

"Colonel, you realize that our principal is the offended party."

"I do."

"And that he has therefore the choice of weapons."

"Precisely."

"I would like to warn you, that, owing to the gravity of the insult, we demand the most severe conditions."

"Count Stolitzine is prepared to accept any conditions."

"Good. I will now expound them. The weapon to be used is the French army regulation revolver, model 92. We have a pair in our possession . . . Firing distance, thirty feet. Fire to be opened at the word of command of the chief witness who will be appointed by lot upon the scene of action. The opponents will continue firing until one or the other is out of action. We propose that the encounter shall take place to-morrow morning at seven o'clock behind the paddock of the Bubbling Wells Road race course."

Colonel Koutsnietzoff and Mr. Berrenger took counsel together in the neighbouring room, and returned saying:

"We accept all your provisions except one. We do not agree with your choice of locality."

The eagle-faced ex-Consul gave them a haughty look, suspecting a piece of trickery which would deprive him of a sensational encounter.

"I beg your pardon. What? What did you say?"

"I merely objected," replied Colonel Koutsnietzoff, "to the locality mentioned. Even at the early hour of seven, the race-course paddock will be open to inquisitive eyes, and we prefer to avoid onlookers. This duel is a strictly private affair, and must not degenerate into a free exhibition for the rank and file. Incidentally, my dear Consul, I would like to put you on your honour not to mention to any living soul the reason for the meeting. That is one of our principal's conditions."

"Agreed."

"We ask you to give us your word of honour on this matter."

"Yes . . . of course . . . of course . . ."

"I repeat. Your word of honour, please!"

The eagle-faced Consul stiffened.

"Look here, Colonel," he said, "do you trust us or do you not?"

"Your attitude, Consul . . ."

"What's wrong with my attitude?"

The eagle was now thoroughly annoyed. His supporter, Olivera, intervened.

"My dear Accosta, if we go on like this, we shall have three duels instead of one. The seconds will send other seconds, and those seconds will send more seconds, until finally all Shanghai will be engaged in mortal combat."

The Consul grew more and more enraged.

"Mr. Olivera, I won't have you . . ."

"You won't have me what?"

Mr. Berrenger now broke in:

"Listen, gentlemen, if you prefer to fight your private duel first, our client can always wait until you've finished."

When at last order had been restored, and Paolo's two seconds had given their word of honour not to divulge the real reason for the duel, the Colonel continued:

"The duel is to be attributed to a political disagreement between the two parties concerned. It is to take place in the riding school of the Columbia Riding Academy. There we are certain to be alone, sheltered from all danger of prying eyes."

M. d'Accosta finally agreed to these terms. Doctor Norbert from the French Hospital was to be present, and no report was to be issued to the press.



The day before the duel, Boris was working in his study in the *Petit Trianon*. Naturally, he had made no mention of the affair, either to Claudette or to Magali. Putting down his pen, he began to ponder. Why had he made that sudden attack upon Paolo?

Boris was no coward. He was not at all concerned about the issue of the duel. What did interest him, however, was to discover why he had suddenly adopted that swashbuckling attitude in the French Club. He was not a quarrelsome sort of man as a rule. A Don Juan spoilt by success, he had always refused to take his affairs with women too seriously. Paolo had often taunted him before now, and he had never been annoyed. Why, therefore, this sudden bitter resentment at Paolo's insinuations about himself and Magali? It would have been pardonable in a husband, touchy

about his wife's reputation, to have felt affronted at any insult offered to Claudette. But to strike a man in public on behalf of his wife's paid companion, was, to say the least of it, strange.

Having pondered for some time, he came to the inevitable conclusion. Magali meant so much to him that he would not allow her name to be bandied about in public. Lounging in his armchair, he faced the situation clearly in his mind. By degrees, unknown to himself, Magali had become an important figure in his life. When she had kissed him that evening on the sofa, Boris had been stirred as never before. He realized now that his heart ached for Magali, the woman who for two years had shared the privacy of his hearth and home.

Magali's stiff resistance had made her seem even more desirable. Like all Casanovas he realized for the first time that easy success could bring deception. Magali, who had never flirted with him, innocent of all ulterior motives, had provided the spark which kindled the flame.

And Boris was pleasantly struck by the irony of the situation—namely that he was about to fight for the *beaux yeux* of a woman who was not yet his save in imagination.

Claudette was in bed with a slight touch of 'flu. Her mother was by her side, nursing her with an over-fussiness occasioned by a bad conscience. Boris had lunched with them, as in the days before the clouds had gathered to disturb their peace of mind. Boris was a fatalist. If he was killed in the duel, the women would know it soon enough. Why frighten them in advance?

He had ordered a cup of tea to be brought to him in his study. His number one boy came in without the tea, but with the news that M. Kimura, of the Japanese Consulate, had called to see him.

Boris was surprised to receive a visit from Mr. Kimura. He knew him by name as the *chargé d'affaires* of the territories occupied by Japan, right-hand man to the Consul-General, employed by the latter on ticklish tasks in which he did not wish to compromise himself or the Higher Powers in Tokyo.

Mr. Kimura entered. He was a little Nipponese, a native of Hokkaido. He wore blue-tinted, horn-rimmed spectacles, the better to conceal his inner thoughts, and seemed to float in his beige suit, which was two sizes too large for his body. He spoke very correct and stilted English, having obtained a Doctorate of Philosophy in the University of Southern California, and walked timidly, as though fearing to injure the carpet by his tread.

Bowing correctly from the waist, he seated himself gingerly on the edge of the arm-chair which Boris proffered him.

Friendly relations had been established, through the influence of Paolo, between the Stolitzine-Borgia combine and the Japanese

authorities. Paolo, as an Italian, was *persona gratissima* both with the Consul-General and with the Commander-in-Chief of the troops occupying the Bas Yang Tse. The Japs confided freely in Paolo, but were cautious in their attitude to Boris. However interesting the information which he passed on to his associate, the Japanese nevertheless regarded Stolitzine as a potential enemy.

When the tea was brought in, Boris enquired politely the reason for Mr. Kimura's visit. Mr. Kimura assumed a friendly, confiding tone, like someone about to relate a funny story.

"Please, forgive me, Count Stolitzine, for interrupting you in your work, but I came to ask you a tiny question. . . . Oh, a mere bagatelle of course."

Boris guessed at once that it must be something of paramount importance, if the subject was broached as timidly as all that.

"And what is this 'bagatelle' you wish to know?"

"I understand that you and Monsieur Borgia are to fight a duel."

Boris was not at all nonplussed. It was quite natural that the members of the Fifth Column should have already repeated it to the Consulate. He answered:

"Yes, we are. Mr. Borgia offered me a public insult. In all countries men of honour choose that method of settling their disputes. I hope your Consul-General has no objection!"

Mr. Kimura bowed apologetically, and went on in his gentle voice:

"No objection whatsoever, Count Stolitzine! You know that we coloured races are always delighted when two white men see fit to kill each other. If we harboured any regrets at all, it would be that there were only two of you concerned in this encounter.

"So your respected Consul-General grants me absolution?"

"Tee hee! That is not quite the case, however. The Consul-General has a request to make of you."

"Well, and what is that?"

"Oh, it is of no real importance. Just this. It would be better . . . em . . . how do Europeans express it? . . . Oh yes, I know. It would be better if the outcome of the ordeal was not unfavourable to Mr. Borgia."

Boris saw what he was driving at. He protested:

"No one can predict what will happen in a serious duel. If it was merely a duel with swords, the kind of duel they used to practise in far-off days in Parisian boulevards to amuse the crowd, then I could promise you that Borgia would escape with a mere prick in the forearm. But, as you know, Mr. Paolo Borgia has insisted upon fighting with revolvers."

"I was unaware of that, Count Stolitzine."

"No, you were not unaware of it. Let me repeat: this is a duel

with revolvers in which either he or I will be seriously wounded, perhaps even killed."

"The Consul-General would prefer that it should not be Monsieur Paolo Borgia . . ."

"Who got hurt! In other words, you're asking me to fire into the air and let my opponent have his way with me?"

"Te . . . he . . . he. I perceive you take my meaning, Count Stolitzine!"

"In fact, you're asking me to put up no defence against the man who's publicly insulted me!"

"Remember, sir, if you please, that we have no personal affection for Mr. Borgia. But, thanks to him, our understanding with your business rests on such a firm basis that we would not wish to lose such a useful diplomatic agent as Mr. Borgia. You get my meaning, Count Stolitzine?"

"It's as clear as the rising sun, Mr. Kimura."

"Very well, Count Stolitzine. Can I rely on your promise?"

Boris got to his feet and said:

"Your memory, I presume, is fairly good, Mr. Kimura."

"Er, yes, sir, I believe so, I believe so."

"Good. Then I'll be glad if you'll repeat verbatim the following message to your Consul-General. 'When Count Boris Alexandrovitch Stolitzine fights a duel, he does not waste his ammunition.' I'll be glad if you'll repeat that sentence to me word for word, here and now."

Mr. Kimura also rose abruptly to his feet. Flushing a deep scarlet, he repeated Boris's ultimatum word for word.

"Mr. Kimura, I thank you. And may I add one last request? Should fortune go against me to-morrow, you and Mr. Borgia will celebrate my death over a glass of *saké* wine. If, on the other hand, I come out victorious, be good enough to don your best white suit of mourning in commiseration for a departed friend."

The Russian and the Japanese exchanged a cold bow. Mr. Kimura left the room, and was escorted to his carriage by boys number one and two.



Boris dined that night with Magali and Claudette. The meal was served in the Countess's boudoir owing to her mild attack of 'flu.

Claudette was agreeably surprised to find her husband so attentive and high-spirited. She began to wonder whether, after all, she had misjudged him. Magali was also pleased at Boris's good behaviour, but at the same time conscience-stricken, knowing that

she was the cause of it. She kept avoiding Boris's eye, aware of the hidden secret between them. It was as though he wished to tell her, 'Magali, I know you love me, and that's why I'm back at home, enjoying the comforts of my fireside.'

Boris was at his best that night, enchanting his listeners with the gaiety and brilliance of his talk. Next day, at dawn, he was to risk his life. But to-night he gave no intimation of it.

Magali could not conceal her nervousness; her conscience was giving her a foretaste of remorse. Strange that a sense of guilt should already possess her, that she should repent of a sin not yet committed! But that the sin was inevitable, she could not doubt. Like a helpless onlooker, watching a man fall from a high cliff, she foresaw her own downfall, powerless to save herself from disaster.

After dinner, Boris kissed Claudette good night, tucking her up in bed like a child. He then followed Magali into the sitting-room. Magali, jumping up, made as though to leave, when suddenly the telephone rang.

"If that's for me, say I'm out," said Boris.

It was a woman's voice:

"Hullo, Claudette, is that you?"

Some flash of intuition caused Magali to answer:

"Yes, it's me. Who's speaking? I can't hear very well."

"It's Mireille!"

"Oh Mireille, darling, how are you?"

"How are *you*, darling? That's much more important."

The voices of Magali and Claudette were very similar. They spoke with the same accent and intonation. Mireille Dargens, still imagining she was talking to Claudette, went on:

"My poor Claudette, I only rang up to say how much we sympathize with you in this unpleasant affair."

Magali, bewildered, said the first thing that came into her head.

"You always were a good friend, Mireille."

"Your husband behaved splendidly last night! He put Borgia well and truly in his place."

Magali realized that something was afoot of which she knew nothing. So she pretended to know all.

"Well," she said, "he couldn't have acted otherwise, could he?"

Mireille went on in her honeyed tones.

"Naturally no one believed a word of Borgia's horrid accusations. You know what a dreadful gossip he is, and how he loves inventing scandals. Besides, we've got too high an opinion of Boris to imagine he'd ever be unfaithful to you, especially with your paid companion. After all, one either behaves like a gentleman, or one doesn't. Lace and dust-cloths don't go well together."

Magali's hand trembled so much that she could barely hold the receiver to her ear. With a great effort of will she managed to control her voice sufficiently to reply:

"You may be quite sure that Boris wouldn't do such a thing to me."

"Of course not; of course not. When a man's blessed with a treasure like you for a wife, he's not likely to get embroiled with his wife's companion, a woman who once captained a gang of *taxi-girls*. By the way, there's a rumour going round that the gentlemen concerned are to fight a duel! Is it true?"

"Mireille, it's a secret. I can tell you nothing."

"Gosh, you should have seen old Paolo's face when Boris struck him. He crumpled up like a jelly. You've got good reason to be proud of your husband. But I'd like to give you a word of advice, all the same. Keep an eye on that paid companion of yours. You know the saying 'No smoke without fire.' Well, darling, I'll say good night now, and pleasant dreams."

Mireille Dargens hung up the receiver.

XV

MIREILLE DARGENS' sudden call to Magali had been inspired by a long conversation between herself and the Casa Mello. That evening the two women had gone into a huddle in the Casa Mello's drawing-room, where they had gossiped for hours on end, discussing over and over again the incident in the French Club.

They were both intensely pleased that the Countess Stolitzine had been humiliated by her own husband—and with the ex-Captain of the *taxi-girls* at the *Topaze*. What a superb situation! What joy to see the Countess Stolitzine brought low, like any ordinary little *bourgeoise*! What a scalp dance there'd be among all Shanghai's society dames when they got to hear of it! It would serve her right, that interloper among the white women of the Concession, who, with a mere lift of the eyebrow, had filched away the man they'd all been pursuing for years!

Mireille, having fired her Parthian shot down the telephone, turned to the Casa Mello with the air of a triumphant harpy. In the course of her journalistic career, Mireille had worked off

her spleen in her malicious little articles, taking a sadistic joy in ridiculing her acquaintances. Now she nourished a cordial hatred for Claudette. Helping herself to one of the Marquise's cigarettes, she said:

"Dearest, that was quite the most effective way of arousing the Stoltzine's suspicions. That little bitch has been much too spoilt. It was high time someone told her that Boris was cuckolding her like all the rest."

Magali put down the receiver at the same time as Mireille. She turned to Boris, her face drawn and white.

"Why did Mireille ring you?" he asked.

"She thought she was talking to Claudette. Thank God she shot her venom at me instead."

Magali repeated Mireille's words. Boris listened in silence. Just a typical example of feminine cattiness, he thought. Magali, in a fever of impatience, said:

"Boris, did you really strike Paolo?"

"Yes, last night, at the French Club."

"Why?"

"Because he said I was your lover."

"And you challenged him to a duel."

"No, it was he who did the challenging. He insulted you, and I struck him as he deserved. So he sent round his seconds to me this morning. Everything's arranged."

"You're going to fight a duel?"

"Yes, to-morrow at seven. I hate that little viper, Mireille. If it hadn't been for her, you'd have known nothing about it."

"Are you fighting with swords?"

"No, with revolvers. We're to fire two shots each. Just a bit of childish nonsense; nothing serious."

"You're saying that to comfort me. I don't believe it. You're going to risk your life for me."

"Why not? You were publicly insulted, and I'm defending your reputation. That's what happens when one's in love. It's just natural instinct."

"Boris!"

Magali's impassioned cry was sweet music in Boris's heart. He took her in his arms, and gently whispered in her ear:

"Darling, no one in the world has the right to insult you in my presence."

"But this duel! It's terrifying!"

"Not at all. Merely a chance for me to be able to prove how much I love you."

Magali, in ecstasy, looked at Boris with new eyes. He seemed to her nobler and more heroic than ever before. She held him close

to her with passion, admitting to herself for the first time: 'This is my lover.'

"I don't want you to come to any harm."

"Nonsense, darling, don't think about that. I can defend myself all right. I was considered a crack shot in my regiment."

"Where's this duel taking place?"

"Ah! That I can't tell you."

"Yes, yes, tell me please!"

"You must be good and wait for me here."

"I implore you, Boris. Tell me. I *must* know."

"No, it's better not. Magali, there's only one thing I ask of you."

"What's that?"

"Kiss me, and bring me luck!"

It was their second kiss, and once more they were giddy with passion. Finally Boris tore himself away, and abruptly left the room.



Magali passed a completely sleepless night. She did not bother even to undress. She lay on her bed, contemplating that second moment of ecstasy when Boris had kissed her, his tenderness and the sure proof he had given her of his attachment. For the first time in her life she was experiencing the terror of an illicit love-affair. Her twenty years of respectability with Ben Hobson seemed like a dream. During those years she had often allowed her fancy to wander—she had pictured herself falling helplessly into temptation, and suffering the tortures of remorse. But the years dragged by, and nothing had awakened her dormant passions. Now suddenly, without her conscious consent, she found herself embroiled in the very situation of which she had so often dreamed. A man was actually risking his life for her sake. Never could she adequately return his love, never sufficiently reward him for his sacrifice.

At the early hour of six, she rushed to the window. Peeping through the curtains, she saw the dark figure of Boris talking to two men in the courtyard below. His seconds, no doubt. All three men got into the waiting car and drove off through the mist.

Suddenly Magali made up her mind. She would ignore Boris's advice, and follow them secretly to the scene of action. Chauffeur Number Two would drive her there. To wait patiently at home was beyond her powers of endurance.

She took her fur coat from her cupboard—it was very cold that morning—and began searching feverishly for her bag and

gloves. Opening her bedroom door to go out, she was amazed to find herself standing face to face with Claudette, fully dressed like herself, muffled up in furs. She cried out impatiently:

"Claudette, where on earth are you going? What's the matter with you?"

Claudette, as white and haggard as her mother, replied:

"What about you, darling? Where are you going?"

"So you know! You know that . . . something's happened?"

"Boris has gone off to fight a duel with Borgia."

"Who told you?"

"Chang."

Chang, number four boy in the Stolitizine *ménage*, was far the sharpest and cleverest member of the household. He worshipped Claudette.

"Chang was in town yesterday," explained Claudette hurriedly. "He met Fernand Broutillon's boy, who told him that Boris and Borgia had quarrelled in the French Club, and that they were to fight a duel."

Magali's heart beat wildly. What else did her daughter know?" She whispered tensely:

"Did he tell you the reason for the duel?"

"Yes. Boris apparently struck Borgia for making some insulting remark about me."

"What happened then?"

"Borgia was forced into a duel."

Magali's relief was so intense, that for a moment she felt dizzy. Thank God the local gossips had missed the point, had not tumbled to the true reason for the encounter.

"Yes, yes," she said, to emphasize the point. "That's what it was. Your husband struck Borgia for insulting you in public."

"Yes. But Mother, how do *you* know all about it?"

Magali quickly invented some explanation to satisfy her daughter's curiosity, and concluded:

"Darling, I didn't tell you because you're ill, and ought to be in bed. For Heaven's sake remain indoors, and don't come out on this wretched morning."

Claudette revolted at this.

"What," she said, "stay in bed when Boris's life is in danger? No, Mother, that I won't do. I may hold some grievance against him for his behaviour to me in the past, but I admire him now for standing up for me. I know Boris is a bit of a rake, but I also know that he's a man of honour. And that, to my mind, covers a multitude of sins. I'd forgive him a great deal for that. So I'm off after him. The suspense of waiting here would drive me mad!"

"Where is this duel?"

"Inside the Columbia Riding School, Chang said."

"Let me go alone, Claudette! It's madness for you to venture out on this freezing cold morning!"

"No, Mother. If you go, I go too."

Magali saw that it was useless to argue. They got into the Cadillac, Magali at the wheel, and drove through the mist of the cold September morning, arriving at last at the Riding School. It was situated on the border of the French Concession and the Chinese occupied area. No smart ladies dared go riding here of a morning, as there had been rumours of single women on horse-back being molested by Japanese sentries.

Magali drew up the car at the near end of the courtyard. In the far distance she could see the seconds' cars parked against the wall, with Borgia's red Packard beside them.

It was ten minutes to seven. Huddled inside the car in their fur coats, frozen with cold, mother and daughter sat waiting. Neither dared communicate her thoughts to the other. They sat like two condemned prisoners, dumbly awaiting the executioner's arrival.

It was a kind of slow torture; each minute seemed an eternity. Magali kept looking at her wrist-watch. When the hands reached seven, she felt as though her heart had altogether ceased to beat, that drop by drop, the blood was draining from her body. She could neither move nor speak. There were the walls of the Riding School, visible through the mist at about fifty yards' distance. Silence reigned along the avenue of trees.

Suddenly they heard two shots fired in quick succession. Claudette screamed. Clutching hold of her mother, she wailed: "Oh, God!"

A pause, and two more shots rang out. Then a long interval of silence. Mother and daughter sat in agonized tension. A mist had formed over the windows of the car.

Time passed. The doors of the Riding School remained closed. This uncertainty was fearful. Four shots! If both duellists had missed, the party would long ago have dispersed.

Magali clutched the door handle, and started to get out. Claudette held her back by sheer force.

"Don't go, Mother. It would be madness! Stay in the car and wait!"

Mother and daughter were pale as death. They clung together in their terror, dumbly awaiting the verdict. Minutes passed. It was now twenty-past seven.

Suddenly they heard an alarm bell. A hospital ambulance came in sight, driven at full speed; it made for the avenue of trees, and

drew up outside the doors of the Riding School. Evidently the doctor had telephoned the hospital. One of the combatants must have been wounded; seriously perhaps.

Magali wiped away the fog from off the side-window of the car. She saw two male attendants enter the Riding School, and come out again bearing a horizontal figure on a stretcher. Then a mist came before her eyes, and she could see no more. She stammered out:

"Claudette, see who it is—which is it, for God's sake. There's something wrong with my eyes."

"I can't distinguish, Mother."

They heard the ambulance doors being closed. A man, probably the doctor, climbed on to the seat beside the driver. Then, as though suddenly a ray of sunshine had pierced the fog, bringing warmth back into their frozen hearts, the figure of Boris appeared in the doorway of the Riding School, walking in their direction, accompanied by his two seconds. He stopped, shook them both warmly by the hand, and bent his steps towards the waiting limousine.

Magali, to attract his attention, pressed down her hand hard on the Cadillac's klaxon horn. Startled, Boris turned in their direction, wondering who could have brought his wife's Cadillac upon the scene. He opened the door of the car, and was amazed to feel himself seized by the wrist in a woman's tenuous grip. Magali was sobbing wildly, and Claudette, sitting beside her, welcomed him with her usual quiet smile.

"Boris, Providence has spared your life. Come on, get into the car," she said.

Boris got in behind them. But observing that Magali was too overwrought even to control the steering-wheel, much less put the car into gear, he took her place on the driver's seat. Looking at the two women, he said gently:

"Well, I thought I'd given you strict orders to remain at home?"

"We couldn't do that," broke in Magali excitedly. "The suspense would have been too agonizing. Boris, forgive us, please!"

Magali and Claudette kept looking at Boris as though he were a ghost. They wanted to feel him all over, to make sure he was really alive. They kept repeating:

"He's safe. He's safe!"

Claudette was the first to collect her wits. She said:

"And Borgia?"

"Badly injured, I'm afraid," said Boris unhappily. "We fired four shots. The first two were both misses. His second shot grazed

my ear, and mine struck him in the spinal column. He's been taken to hospital to be operated on."

"How could he have been hit in the spinal column?"

"Because, in a duel, the combatants stand sideways, offering a smaller target. I aimed at his chest, and the bullet pierced the lumbar region. I'm sorry for Borgia. But it was the fortune of war. It was he who provoked me to start with, and it was he who laid down the conditions. He was bent on killing me. There's no reason for me to feel guilty."

They arrived back at the *Petit Trianon*. Magali prescribed for Claudette an immediate return to bed. All three of them did full justice to the big breakfast served by the Manchurian boy, number one. Boris was made to describe the duel in every detail. It had fallen to the lot of Mr. Cesare d'Accosta, Borgia's chief second, to direct the proceedings. He had measured out the thirty-foot distance between the combatants with such narrow strides, that Berrenger and Olivera, less bloodthirsty than the ex-Consul, had been forced to raise objections. When, after much squabbling, they had at last come to an agreement upon the distance, Mr. d'Accosta had gravely handed over the two loaded revolvers, one to each of the parties concerned. The melancholy eagle, who had attired himself specially for the occasion in an old, black frock-coat, reminiscent of the days of Crispi, had given them their instructions.

"Gentlemen, you will fire at my word of command. I shall say 'One, two, three, fire!' You must not shoot between the words 'One' and 'Fire.'"

And Boris added finally:

"I would perhaps have let Borgia off, but when I felt his bullet graze my ear, I was determined to give him what he deserved."

Boris left the room. A few minutes later Magali followed him. She found him sitting in his special little study, next to the library. Rushing towards him, she flung her arms round his neck, sobbing convulsively. It was the reaction after the horrible strain she had been through. Boris kissed her again and again. They spoke in quick, low tones, their sentences jerky and hurried, the language of two people violently in love, whom death had nearly severed.

"Boris, you never told me it was so serious!"

"What was the use? I didn't want to worry you!"

"Providence saved your life."

"No, it was your kiss that brought me victory. I love you, Magali. Don't cry any more now. It's all over."

"Yes, let me cry; it does me good."

The telephone bell rang, interrupting their talk. Boris lifted the receiver.

"Hullo! Yes, Stolitzine speaking. What? The Japanese Consulate-General! Very well, I'll wait. Yes, I'm listening." He hung on for a few minutes, and eventually heard a little high-pitched voice calling down the wire. Boris recognized it at once.

"It's Count Stolitzine, is it not?"

"Yes. Who's speaking, please?"

"Kimura. Count Stolitzine, it has come to our ears that the outcome of the duel was very different from what we had been led to expect."

"Mr. Kimura. I'm truly sorry to have to inform you that I'm not dead. A thousand pardons!"

"Mr. Borgia, I understand, has been seriously injured."

"The fortunes of war, Mr. Kimura."

"Dear, dear. How unfortunate! How very unfortunate! The Consul-General has already communicated with the General-in-Command of the troops occupying the district. Both gentlemen wish you to know that they are pained that you did not see fit to follow our friendly advice."

"I regret, Mr. Kimura."

"That's all I wished to say, Count Stolitzine. Please forgive me for disturbing you."

Mr. Kimura hung up at one end, Boris at the other. Boris knew exactly what this exchange of exquisite civility portended. If Borgia died as the result of the duel, Boris's life in Shanghai would not be worth a sou.

The telephone conversation had alarmed Magali. She asked:

"What did the Consulate want?"

"Oh, nothing," said Boris, to allay her fears. "They were merely asking for news of Borgia."

"Why didn't they ring up the French Hospital?"

"They did. But the hospital couldn't give them any further details. The Japs are interested in Borgia's welfare, you know!"

"Aren't you frightened of getting into trouble with them?"

"No. We've had a tacit understanding with them for years. It's worked very well. So you needn't start worrying about that."

"And the business? Who's going to run it now?"

"I am."

"And if Borgia . . ." Magali hesitated . . . "If Borgia dies?"

"I'll carry on by myself."

"And if he gets well? What then?"

"He'll be free to buy himself out of the business. I'll find another partner who'll be glad enough to work with me."

"So you're not worried about anything?"

"About nothing at all, Magali, darling. You love me, and that's all that counts."

XVI

THE Borgia-Stolitzine duel had caused a sensation. Duelling was a thing unknown in Shanghai. Malice and spite abounded; men made disparaging remarks about one another, slandered one another, and when tempers rose to boiling point, had been known even to exchange blows in public bars. Dirty tricks were practised, in the financial, commercial and social spheres of life. But a real fight with revolvers, to liquidate a feud in blood, was a thing unheard of.

So for many days to come this duel was the sole topic of conversation in the Cathay grill-room, in business offices and among the members of the *Corps Diplomatique*. Everyone had his own theory. As no report had been published in the English or American newspapers, and only in a little Chinese rag had there been found some small reference to a fight between a Latin and a Slav, there was no limit to the fantastic speculations which could be indulged in.

Some maintained that Boris had found Borgia in bed with his wife in the Hotel Metropole; others stated categorically that the whole trouble had been caused by Flora Ying. The more imaginative built up a very complicated scenario in which Borgia had bribed Claudette's paid companion to compromise the innocent Boris and indirectly break up his happy home.

While all this excited tittle-tattle was going on in the outside world, Borgia was lying strapped to his bed in the French Hospital, hanging between life and death.

Two weeks later a report was issued that Borgia was definitely out of danger. He had undergone a serious operation to remove the bullet which had shattered two of the vertebrae in the lumbar region of the spinal column. It was said that he would never regain the use of his legs.

Boris, in his partner's absence, was thoroughly immersed in business. The tension in the Pacific increased daily, in spite of

the debates in Washington and the peaceful protestations of Japan. All those who were 'in the know' felt certain that the military chiefs in Tokyo would not remain inactive during the whole course of the European war.

Calling one morning at the United States Consulate, Boris learnt that a new and final appeal was to be issued to all American citizens residing in Shanghai, advising them that if they did not leave the city by the S.S. *Oregon*, they ran the risk of never getting home at all. This news alarmed him. He thought at once of Magali.

He had arranged to meet her that afternoon at five o'clock in a little flat in the Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie, near the French *lycée*. Boris had rented this flat for their secret meetings. It consisted of two ground-floor rooms, recently furnished by a French naval lieutenant, second-in-command of the sloop *Neptune*, which had been stationed for several years in the China seas. The lovers met there secretly, virtually slinking along the walls, each from a different direction, to avoid the danger of prying eyes.

Their love-affair had the added flavour of forbidden fruit. Never, in all his amorous career, had Boris experienced such intense satisfaction. Each day he counted the hours until their twilight meetings—each morning awoke in an anticipation of the evening's joy.

For Magali, this love-affair was a delicious torture, in which ecstasy was tempered with remorse. When a sense of guilt threatened to overwhelm her, when her conscience rose spectre-like before her eyes, she felt desperately like a drowning man clutching at a rope or spar, for something to justify her happiness. She argued with herself that, since her intimacy with Boris, Boris had become a changed man. The fickle, distraught, neglectful husband had at last come home to roost; now he was constantly attentive and devoted to his little wife. Claudette was gay and happy once again. She even blamed herself for judging him too hastily. Her mother had been right, she thought. One must not demand impossibilities from men. This fact was abundantly proved by Boris's renewal of tenderness towards her.

The afternoon of Boris's visit to the United States Consulate, Magali was lying on her bed in her black silk kimono in the little apartment in the Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie. She was watching her lover. He seemed preoccupied. She asked him:

"Darling, what's the matter?"

Boris was silent for a moment, and then questioned her:

"What kind of a passport have you got?"

"An American passport. My late husband was Ben Hobson, from Ohio."

"You're no longer a French citizen?"

"No."

"You're registered at the United States Consulate?"

"Yes, of course. They renewed my passport two years ago."

"So you could, if necessary, leave Shanghai on the S.S. *Oregon*?"

"Boris, are you mad?"

"It would be safer if you did."

"But Boris, I'm not going to leave you! And in any case, why should you suggest my leaving Shanghai?"

"Because war between Japan and America is only a question of weeks. We all know it's coming—it's inevitable."

"Well, and what then?"

"I should feel happier if I knew you were in safety. God knows what those Japs will do to American or English people once war is declared. Personally, it would break my heart to see you go, but we must think of your safety."

Magali rushed to him and threw her arms round his neck.

"Don't talk nonsense," she said. "With your arms around me I feel protected from the world."

She couldn't tell him the whole truth, that any danger was preferable to being separated from her daughter and her lover. Claspng him tightly to her, she added:

"Besides, your influence is surely strong enough to protect us. Aren't you on good terms with the Japanese?"

"No. It's Borgia who's their friend. They merely tolerate me as a convenience."

"Yes, but you've done a lot for them through the medium of Borgia."

"Do you think they'd show any gratitude for that? Not they. Now that the Borgia-Stolitzine combine is broken, I couldn't trust them for a moment."

Boris did not wish to frighten Magali by telling her of Mr. Kimura's visit, and of his hostile attitude. But in his heart of hearts he knew what it betokened. Finally, Magali asked him a question which had been on her lips for several days.

"Listen, Boris! What will become of Borgia? Now that he's nearly recovered, what will he do?"

"What would any normal man do in such circumstances? Having fought a duel and come out of it badly wounded, he would realize it was impossible to continue our partnership. I expect any day now to receive a formal visit from his lawyer, to discuss the winding up of our business. But what concerns me most, darling, is to ensure your safety in case of war. Early to-morrow morning I'll go to the docks and book your passage on the S.S. *Oregon*."

Magali drew herself up defiantly.

"I forbid you to do any such thing. I'm staying here with you. If there's to be danger, we'll see it through together."

Her determination put an end to Boris's doubts. Taking her in his arms, he said:

"Darling, now I know why I love you. I love you for your beauty, and, above all, for your spirit."



Paolo Borgia, paralysed in both legs, was driven back from the French Hospital to his home in the Avenue Foch. He had escaped death, but knew that he was destined to be crippled for the rest of his life. A picture of misery, he lay back in his bath-chair, while the servant wheeled him through the deserted garden up to his house. This chair was to be his sole means of locomotion, until, after long and painful effort, he had learnt to walk on crutches.

The servant wheeled him through the empty ground-floor rooms. Like a ghost from the past he gazed pitifully at the library which he had dedicated to the relics of his ancestors. He looked at himself in the long Venetian glass, which formerly had served so well his narcissic tendencies. How often had he stood before this glass, admiring his plump chest and well-formed legs! Henceforth he could neither admire himself, nor were women likely to admire him. His enemy's bullet had brought him low. For a man like Borgia there could be no worse fate.

He bade the servant wheel him to the drawing-room. Here he called for port, offering a glass to his friend Cesare d'Accosta, who had insisted on accompanying him from the hospital. But the old moulting eagle was not the man to cheer him up. Just to take a look at d'Accosta was enough to make one burst into tears or grind one's teeth with rage.

After half an hour, Paolo could stand it no longer.

"Caro Cesare," he said, "to tell the truth, I'd rather be alone. You've been a good friend to me in my misfortune. I'll not forget your kindness. But, speaking frankly, your face depresses me. Forgive me for talking to you thus. You know I'm loyal as well as outspoken. You remind me of a vulture circling round the body of a dead Parsee high above the Towers of Silence in Bombay, ready at any moment to swoop down upon my carcass."

"Oh, Paolo," moaned the ex-Consul in a doleful voice.

"I'm joking, of course. Don't take me seriously. Give me your hand, dear friend, and excuse my irritable nerves."

Mr. d'Accosta gave a painful smirk and took his leave.

Paolo sank back exhausted in his chair. He needed solitude to collect his thoughts. The doctor had said there was nothing more to be done, and had advised him to try out his crutches by degrees. It was bound to be a long and painful process, the doctor said. For the last three weeks Paolo's mind had been obsessed by his physical condition. The future loomed before him with a dreadful clarity. Henceforth he would be a mere invalid, a poor man pushed about in a wheel chair, or, at best, a cripple dragging himself around on crutches.

It was good-bye for ever to women, their smiles, their sly looks, their coquetries. They would no longer cast a glance in his direction. The kinder of them would pity him. It was a frightening prospect. The desperation of his mind brought with it a frightful hatred, an unspeakable resentment towards his enemy. Paolo was a bad loser. It never occurred to him to reflect, 'After all, it was you who provoked this duel; you who had the choice of weapons.' All he could grasp was that Fate had injured him, leaving Boris unscathed, free to pursue his victorious, triumphant career.

This bitterness had eaten like a cancer into his soul, from the moment when the surgeon had broken the news to him that he would never fully recover. After Boris's marriage, Borgia had stifled his rage. Now this rage was transmuted into a frenzied thirst for revenge, intensified by the sight of his inert legs and crippled body.



Mr. Kimura, of the Japanese Consulate, called at the Avenue Foch to pay his respects. To-day he was not wearing his customary tailor-made suit, two sizes too large for his body, but, instead, a ceremonial black coat with pin-striped trousers. He handed his tall hat to the boy, who ushered him into Paolo's presence. He made a formal bow. He was carrying a small parcel.

"My dear Commendatore. I hope I am the first to wish you a happy recovery in your hospitable home."

Paolo was much impressed by this visit. He motioned Mr. Kimura to a chair. Before seating himself, Mr. Kimura handed Paolo a present from the Consul-General, a pretty filigree Kyoto vase. Paolo thanked him profusely, and ordered tea.

Mr. Kimura's kind attentiveness was a balm to Paolo's wounded spirit. He had long been on friendly terms with the Japanese *chargé d'affaires*—they were both upholders of the anti-Komintern pact. Paolo knew Kimura's secret influence in politics, and could count on his collaboration.

In point of fact, Mr. Kimura had for a long time been a member of the secret society of the Black Dragon. He worshipped, like a sort of God, the ancient Mitsuru Toyama, prime instigator of this political organization. Before his diplomatic mission to Shanghai, Kimura had lived in Osaka, where, dressed in a black kimono, he had been a regular attendant at their meetings, and had been initiated into their political programme. The Black Dragon was a society which exercised an even greater power than the Cabinet Ministers, or even than the Emperor Hirohito himself. Kimura had taken an active part in the 1936 disturbances in Tokyo, had helped the rebels to overcome the police and seize the Town Hall, and had escaped imprisonment, thanks to the influence of Colonel Moyahara, one of the most renowned secret agents in the Far East.

This little Mr. Kimura was, in fact, a most extraordinary phenomenon. With his timid bearing and general appearance of frailty, he nevertheless created an impression wherever he went, and inspired people with a feeling of malaise. He was married. His wife, younger daughter of an aristocratic family, lived in Tokyo. She had consented to marry the humbly-born Kimura solely on account of his association with the Black Dragon. On her wedding-day she had assumed the traditional red kimono, woven with pine-needles, plum blossom, and branches of bamboo, a symbolical dress, signifying eternal faithfulness, adolescent purity, and pliancy to her husband's will. Mr. Kimura, separated from her as he was by his duties in Shanghai, never doubted her fidelity, and put implicit faith in the prayers which she offered up daily to the benign spirits to protect him from harm.

Whatever dangers threatened Mr. Kimura in China were certainly not to be found in the house of his good friend Paolo Borgia. Very much the reverse. With the politeness habitual to his race, he pretended not to notice Paolo's infirmity, and endeavoured to recapture the flavour of their long-standing friendship by recalling the happy days they had spent together in Tokyo, at the time when Borgia was drawing money from the funds of the secret counter-espionage.

"Ah, my dear Commendatore," he said, "you do not know with what pleasure I think back upon our happy times in Tokyo. Do you remember how you revelled in the exhibition of Japanese wrestling in the Kokugi Kan Palace? You were so popular with the champions of Mr. Kasugano's school. And those evenings spent in the Kabukiza Theatre! What delight! Those midnight orgies in the Kameido quarter of the town, which you so aptly compared with a little city of dolls' houses, peopled by pocket Venuses! Dear Commendatore! We're very fond of you at the

Consulate, you know!" Then, pointing slyly, very slyly at the wheeled chair, he added: "What a shame! What a dreadful shame!"

Paolo's face was suddenly distorted with rage. Clenching his hands on the arm of the chair, he said:

"My dear Kimura, some things are very difficult to forgive. That, for example."

Mr. Kimura smiled—an encouraging smile. He remained silent for a moment, and then said softly:

"I would like to mention, *en passant*, that it was the wish of His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief of the Bas-Yang-Tsé district, and that of His Excellency the Consul-General, that your opponent should be killed in this duel."

"I am grateful to them for their kindly thought. Does it hold good for the future?"

"The gentlemen in question offer you *carte blanche*."

"What exactly does that imply, Kimura?"

"If by chance you should consider that this—er—unhappy accident deserved compensation, you would meet with their entire approval."

Paolo's eyes lit up. Kimura's words filled his soul with joy.

"My hour will come," he said.

"Vengeance long frustrated sweetens in the mouth."

"Sweetens! No, no, my friend. It works like hashish on the senses!"

"You are free to chose your methods."

"They will be pitiless, I can assure you."

Mr. Kimura smiled, bowed, and withdrew. An observer, watching him leave the house in his tall hat, black coat and gloves, would have taken him for an undertaker, who had come to take premature measurements for the coffin in which Borgia contemplated sealing up his enemy.

XVII

MAGALI'S meetings with Uncle Larry had become less and less frequent since Claudette's marriage. But she thought it good policy not to cut herself completely off from the old drunkard and his concubine in Amoy Road. Their ways, however, lay

apart. Madame Stolitzone no longer belonged in Uncle Larry's circle. On her first arrival in Shanghai she had been forced into contact with certain of his friends. Luckily they did not move in smart society. Luckily, too, they had all of them left Shanghai.

Homer Dodds, chief mechanic of the S.S. *Formosa*, was plying his trade on the high seas. Harry Schweezer had gone bankrupt and absconded, leaving behind him a debt of 40,000 dollars. The beautiful Alfredo was carrying on his parasitical career in Singapore, and the Parsee couple had returned to Bombay.

Uncle Larry, drunkard that he was, was not a bad old soul at heart. He was happy to see his sister-in-law and niece comfortably settled in their *Petit Trianon*, and wished them both long life and prosperity. Magali and Claudette, certain of his good faith, allowed the recollection of those days of agony and despair in the Amoy Road to fade gradually from their minds.

It came therefore as a shock to Magali to be roused early one morning by the voice of Uncle Larry on the telephone. He sounded hoarse, as though he had been up all night drinking.

"Hullo, Magali," he said, "you're not afraid of ghosts, are you? It's Larry."

"How are you, Larry dear? Delighted to hear your voice again."

"And I'd be even more delighted to see you this morning. At once, in fact."

"At once? But it's only eight o'clock!"

"That doesn't matter. It's urgent."

Magali heard a confused whispering at the other end of the line. Two people were arguing. Finally, Kiwi's voice answered.

"Hullo! It's Kiwi speaking. You must forgive Larry. He's as drunk as a dockhand this morning. But he means what he says. It's in your interest to come round here as quickly as possible."

The urgent note in Kiwi's voice roused Magali once and for all. She promised to dress and go round immediately.

Half an hour later, she was ringing the door-bell of the little white house. She was now more worried than curious. This sudden summons boded no good. She was shown into the studio, which was in even more of a mess than usual.

Rasputin, the parrot, greeted her with a salvo of obscenities in three languages. Uncle Larry, indecently dressed as usual, with a week's growth of beard on his face, held out his arms in welcome. Kiwi, in a faded pink dress, her hair awry, went to fetch the tea.

Larry, sprawling on the sofa which groaned under his weight, talked in a hiccupy voice.

"My dear Magali," he said, "I'm s-s-s-sorry to have disturbed

you at such an early hour. But it was an . . . hic . . . urgent matter."

An empty whisky-bottle on the table beside him explained Larry's condition. Magali glanced at it with an expression of disgust, and Larry explained:

"Last night we ce-ce-celebrated Kiwi's birthday. Two bottles of 'Black and White.' Not bad, what? That little bitch! I'm getting her used to the taste of Scotch. Hi! Kiwi! For God's sake hurry with that tea. Magali's thirsty."

Kiwi appeared with the tea. She said nothing. Her face was quite impassive. Magali scented some drama in the air. Suddenly, without more ado, Larry bit off the end of a cigar and cried out:

"Magali . . . Boris has fired me."

"What!"

"What I said! After serving him faithfully for years, the low-down bastard's gone and chucked me out, just like that!"

"When?"

"Yesterday. He said, 'Larry, I'm obliged to dispense with your services from now on.'"

"But, Larry! Why did he go and do that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just a rich man's whim, I suppose!"

"Boris is not the sort of man to discharge you without giving any reason."

"Oh, isn't he!"

"Tell me the whole story!"

"Oh, very well. He thinks I sozzle too much. He doesn't even trust me to navigate a cargo-boat . . . all a lot of bilge, what?"

"You're sure Boris sacked you only for that?"

"Oh well, if you must know, there was also some trouble with cocaine. I was tempted. I did a little trading on my own, using his name as reference. It's all very complicated. But the fact is, I'm on the rocks, broke to the wide."

"Oh dear. Well, what's to be done?"

"Life's hard, Magali, you know. So I've thought out a plan—Kiwi and I discussed it together, in fact. We decided that there was only one person who could save the situation, and that was you, Magali."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You're the only one who can get me out of this infernal hole."

"But listen, Uncle Larry . . . to put it mildly, you've probably done something thoroughly unscrupulous, and you want me to . . ."

"Why not? You're surely the obvious person to intercede between me and my nephew."

Magali started at the word 'nephew.' Uncle Larry burst out laughing.

"Well, don't look so scared," he said. "When Boris married my niece he became my nephew didn't he? I've been working for my own nephew. I'm his uncle by marriage, so to speak. So there's nothing odd to my mind in the cosy little Stolitzine *ménage*—you, Claudette and Boris—coughing up a bit of dough to keep the draught away from dear old Uncle Larry's door."

The more Larry talked, the more alarmed Magali became. She saw the situation clearly. Larry, drunken and dishonest, had become impossible as an employee, so Boris had sacked him. As a result, Larry had sat up all night drinking with his mistress, who had persuaded him to practise this obvious method of black-mail.

Magali took the bull by the horns.

"In short, what is it you want?" she said.

"Either Boris puts me back where I was before—you know how I used to tinker about for him, doing odd jobs, here, there and everywhere—or else he must give me the handsome compensation which any decent man would give his uncle."

"How much?"

"We won't press you too hard. Oh, no, Magali, we wouldn't do that! I think twenty-five thousand dollars would settle us all right!"

"Boris would never rely on you again, Larry. He actually said to me a few months ago that your drunken habits made you incapable of serious work."

"In that case, I won't force him. But I must have my twenty-five thousand dollars. And you, sister dear, are the person who could get them for me. What's twenty-five thousand dollars to a millionaire ten times over? A mere flea-bite!"

"Larry, just think for one moment! How could I possibly ask such a sum of him?"

"You'd surely do it for your poor, impoverished brother-in-law!"

Magali's stubborn attitude infuriated Kiwi. She had been sitting silently up till now, but suddenly flung out:

"If it's a nuisance for you, Magali, Larry can always go and explain the situation to Boris himself. But we thought you'd prefer to arrange it your own way. I don't feel somehow that you'd like Boris suddenly to be faced with the fact that he'd gone and married Larry's niece . . . and your daughter!"

The cards were now on the table. Larry would never have been so callous on his own account, but little Kiwi had worked him up to the pitch of threatening his own sister-in-law. He said:

"Magali, it's to your own interest to keep the whole thing quiet. We've left you alone to hatch your own little plots since you arrived. And don't forget, it was I who gave you your first leg-up at the *Topaze*. Neither Kiwi nor I have ever breathed a word about your *combinazione*. It's now your turn to do something for us. We'll give you a few days' grace. I'm sure you won't fail. With your cleverness and gift of intrigue you're bound to get round Boris. Believe me, it'll be better that way, both for you and Claudette—and for myself too, of course."

Magali returned to the *Petit Trianon*, and locked herself in her bedroom. Worried by her interview with Larry, she lay down on the *chaise-longue* with a wet handkerchief over her temples, to try and ease her racking headache.

She railed against Fate for nagging at her so persistently, and preventing her from enjoying her leisured life in peace. She had conveniently forgotten the methods by which she had attained this life of ease. Magali was blind to her own faults. All the lies and intrigues which she had practised for the last two years were, to her mind, abundantly atoned for by her deep affection for her daughter. If some warning voice had whispered in her ear "Your sins will find you out," she would have protested vehemently that she had done no wrong. Everything had been for Claudette's happiness.

To-day a new cloud had formed on the horizon. Larry, influenced by his sly little mistress, was quite capable of upsetting the apple-cart. How could she keep him at arm's length? If, as was more than probable, Boris refused to take Larry back, how could she keep him from talking? The sum of money he had suggested was out of the question. Boris would quite rightly wish to know why she should try and extort money from him to support the old drunkard in the Amoy Road.

It was just on the cards that she could get the money from him for herself. But what excuse could she give for asking him? Her intimacy with Boris made such a thing more impossible than it would have been before. She blushed at the very thought of asking her lover, as she lay in his arms:

"Darling, please give me a cheque for twenty-five thousand dollars."

Nevertheless she had to do something and do it quick.

That very evening Magali seized an opportune moment, when Claudette was out of the room, to turn the conversation on to the subject of Uncle Larry. She was astounded to hear from Boris that Larry, through excess of drink, had gone completely to seed, and lost all moral sense. He had actually swindled a Chinese merchant of an enormous sum, and had used Boris's name in

other dishonest transactions. Boris finished his story with the words:

"That old fool of a Larry! I could have had him arrested. But what would have been the use? I've sacked him, and that's the end of it. You once told me that Larry Hobson was a distant relation of your late husband. More's the pity for his family's sake. It's a shame the old boy should have sunk so low. Another case of a fatal addiction to drink."

Magali said nothing. There was nothing to be said. The appeal had been summarily dismissed.

That night she lay in bed pondering. At all costs she must find the money. Larry's attitude had been too obviously threatening for her to dismiss it as an imaginary danger. Boris was out that night, so Magali slipped on her dressing-gown and went to her daughter's bedroom, where she confided the whole story to Claudette, impressing on her the need for immediate action.

"Yes, but what can we do?" said Claudette. "We haven't got twenty-five thousand Chinese dollars to give away."

"Yes, we have. We've got your jewels."

Claudette leapt in the air with surprise. She repeated idiotically:

"My jewels? What on earth could you do with them?"

"Sell them. Child, I know it will be a blow to you. But you've got enough sense to realize what a tight spot we're in. If only we'd had Uncle Larry to deal with alone, it would have been all right. He's a kind old soul, rather the worse for drink, that's all. But there's that little fiend Kiwi. It's she who put him up to it."

"Sell my jewels! Mother, it's an impossibility!"

"No, it isn't. Boris has given you an emerald ring, two diamond clips and a jade and gold necklace with gold pendants. Then there's your ruby bracelet. The whole lot's bound to fetch twenty-five thousand dollars, or even more."

"But Boris will wonder where they've gone!"

"No, I've thought that over. Later on I'll get cheap imitations made of the whole lot."

Claudette was in despair. She treasured her husband's presents. They reminded her of the happiest days of her married life. Sadly she opened the drawer of her little writing-case, brought out the jewels one by one, and laid them in the palm of her hand.

Magali read her daughter's thoughts.

"Darling," she said, "there's no alternative."

"Do you think you'll find a purchaser?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that. With all this political unrest increasing

day by day, there's bound to be someone only too pleased to give away bank-notes in exchange for jewellery."

Mother and daughter sat in silence for a while, thinking over the dangers which threatened them from every side. At last Claudette said:

"Mother, don't you think it would be better to tell Boris the truth, and get it over and done with?"

"Are you mad?"

"I'd feel so very much easier in my mind if you'd go and face him with the truth. Mother, go and tell him once and for all that I've never been a widow nor a Baroness."

Magali jumped to her feet.

"Now I *know* you're mad," she said.

Magali looked at her daughter as though she had been guilty of some frightful enormity. She began pacing up and down the room like a caged beast. Claudette, upset by this display of agitation, continued gently:

"Listen, Mother—it would probably be the best way of wiping out our past career of lies and deceptions. Honestly, this ridiculous mask we have to wear stifles me at times. I long to scream out at Boris, 'Darling, I'm just an ordinary little bourgeoisie who loves you, and whom my mother has cast at your head on false pretences' Why not tell him quite openly that I'm your daughter? We'd then be able to go on living here with a clear conscience. There'd be no need for this everlasting pretence. Uncle Larry's blackmailing would then be pointless, and I'd be able to keep my jewels."

Magali was no longer even listening. She was imagining the horrible consequences of admitting to her lover the long string of lies and deceptions that she had practised on him. How could she bear the shame of such a confession? Would Boris calmly accept the fact of having been so completely hoodwinked? It was such a leap in the dark that Magali felt dizzy at the very thought of it. She was frightened for her daughter's sake and still more for her own. At the moment she was so wildly in love with Boris that the idea of losing him filled her with despair.

Suddenly she stopped her pacing, and looked her daughter full in the face. Her mind was made up.

"Claudette," she said, "what you've been suggesting is insane. After living for two years in this house, we couldn't possibly confess anything to Boris. It would be disastrous. We'll have to pay Larry his price. Give me your jewels. I'll start looking for a purchaser to-morrow."

Claudette handed them over, sighing like a little girl who's been asked to give up her extra share of cake. Hardly had Magali

slipped the regalia into her bag, than quick footsteps were heard striding along the passage.

Boris entered the room. He was smiling, apparently in the best of spirits. Looking at the two women he said jokingly:

"What were you plotting, you two?"

"We were just gossiping, darling."

Boris gave each of them an affectionate kiss, and said:

"Claudette, we're going out to-morrow, you and I. The English and American Consulates have got up a gala evening for the Red Cross at the Berkeley Hotel. We must put in an appearance. I've already sent them a cheque for five hundred dollars. So, Claudette, darling, dress up and look your best to-morrow night. Wear all your jewels. I want my wife to be Queen of the Ball, as usual."

"Your orders shall be obeyed, Monseigneur!"

"And now, children, I'll say good night. I've had a very tiring day."

When Boris had left the room, mother and daughter exchanged a quick look. The party to-morrow night was going to upset all their plans. How could Claudette appear without her husband's presents? But Magali's quick brain had already thought out a plan of campaign.

"Don't worry, darling," she said. "To-morrow morning I'll hand your things over to Mr. Yu, the jeweller in the Nanking Road. He'll start at once hunting for a buyer. I'll tell him he's to return them to me at seven in the evening. Then again the following morning I'll take them back to him, so that he can get on with his quest. We've got to snuff out Kiwi and Uncle Larry as soon as possible. They frighten me, those two."

XVIII

THAT night Paolo had gone to sleep in the Avenue Foch, his peace of mind restored by some sensational news.

At seven o'clock the previous evening, a messenger had called from the Japanese Consulate, with a confidential letter from Saigon, carried in the Japanese diplomatic bag.

Paolo had long awaited this letter. He had written to a trustworthy friend of his, an Italian living in French Indo-China, beg-

ging him to make certain discreet enquiries. The results of his researches were to be forwarded through the medium of a Japanese courier.

Paolo's eyes had brightened as he read the letter, which was couched in the form of a report. It read as follows:

Question A: Who exactly was the Baron de Mauchamp, who died in 1939?

Answer: The Baron Edgar de Mauchamp was Resident Minister of the Province of Rang-Kok in Cambodgia from 1932 to 1937. He died of malaria in March, 1939.

Question B: Did the Baron de Mauchamp have a French wife aged sixteen to seventeen?

Answer: The Baron was about fifty-four when he died. He was married, but his wife must now be about forty years of age. After her husband's death, she left the colony and returned to Limousin, in France, where I am told she is now living in retirement.

Question C: Mrs. Magali Hobson states that she lived in Saigon, before coming to Shanghai to take up the post of *Captain* of the *taxi-girls* at the *Topaze*. Who exactly was this Mrs. Hobson?

Answer: Mrs. Magali Hobson was well-known in Saigon. She had lived there for many years. She was married to Benjamin Hobson, an American employed in a big petrol concern. She was smart and attractive, and knew all the fashionable people in Saigon, Dalat, Hué and Hanoi. She and her husband were happily married, and there was no scandal attached to her name. The Hobsons had a lovely daughter called Claudette. In 1939, this girl was about seventeen or eighteen years old. Benjamin Hobson died suddenly, leaving his wife and daughter practically destitute. They left Saigon for an unknown destination. It was rumoured that they had gone to China. Hong-kong, Shanghai, Tientsin? Nobody knew exactly. Since the Japanese occupation of the colony, communications have become so difficult that Mrs. Hobson's old friends have lost touch with her.

Question D: Can you procure me a photograph of Mrs. Hobson when she was living in French Indo-China?

Answer: I have not been able to procure a photograph. But I enclose a cutting from a newspaper showing Mrs. Hobson and her daughter Claudette at a garden party given by the Governor to celebrate the fall of the Bastille.

Paolo had immediately recognized Claudette's face from the picture. The resemblance was unmistakable. This long report was more than a mere treasure-trove to Borgia. It was a formidable weapon in his hands. He read and re-read it, his eyes glittering with malignant joy, repeating over and over again to himself as though he could hardly believe the evidence of his senses: "*Stolit-zine's married the daughter of the Taxi-girl Captain of the Topaze! He's been tricked like a new-born babe!*"

For hours he had lain awake, calculating his plan of campaign.

As dawn broke he had the whole thing carefully worked out in his mind.

Revenge was very sweet!



The following day at one o'clock, Flora Ying's boy came in with the message that Mr. Borgia was waiting for her in the sitting-room.

Flora Ying was expecting him. She powdered her face, rouged her lips, and went downstairs. She hid her surprise at seeing him aged, crippled, and in obvious pain, seated on the sofa with his crutches beside him. She had not realized that his injuries were so severe. From reasons of politeness she made no allusion to his infirmity, and began talking away quite casually as though she had seen him only the day before. Paolo by degrees turned the conversation to the subject of the duel, and, with a smile of disappointment, as though trying to appear resigned to his misfortunes, said:

"The fact is, Flora dear, I challenged your lover to a duel because he'd been making love to his wife's paid companion, and I don't yet know whether she's his mistress or not. . . . Naturally, he denied that there was any intimacy between them, but I'd like to find out for certain, if only from a sort of retrospective curiosity. So that's why I've come to call on you, Flora. I wondered if you'd had any further news from your servant friend at the *Petit Trianon*."

Flora smiled a knowing smile.

"Would it convince you if I showed you the very spot where Boris and the paid companion hold their secret trysts?"

"You mean they've got a meeting-place outside the *Petit Trianon*?"

"Yes. They've got a little flat where they meet from time to time. Naturally the wife knows nothing about it."

"How do *you* know about it?"

"Wong told me, the number three boy."

"And how did Wong get to hear of it?"

"From the chauffeur."

"That's all very interesting. Tell me more, Flora!"

"Twice or three times a week, Boris drives down to the corner of the Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie and the Avenue Clemenceau. He gets out there, and sends the chauffeur home. The chauffeur was naturally interested to discover the reason for this peculiar behaviour, and one day made some private enquiries on his own.

He discovered that Boris had rented a little ground-floor flat at Number 155, Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie. The chauffeur's curiosity was still more roused, so he watched from a distance and saw Mrs. Hobson enter the house ten minutes after Boris. Are you convinced now, my dear Commendatore? Or do you still think they go in there for a nice little evening of cross-word puzzles?"

"No. The evidence is clear enough."

"I'm pleased to be of service to you in this affair, dear friend, because I was afraid you might accuse me of having given you false information before your . . . accident."

"Oh no, Flora. I hold no grievance against *you*. It's all quite obvious. Thank you for bringing the thing to light. You said Number 155, Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie?"

"Yes, on the ground floor. Flat number two."

The boy came in with two cups of tea. Paolo addressed the Chinese girl:

"Flora, may I ask an indiscreet question?"

"My reply will be cautious in proportion as your question is incautious."

"Why do you take such pleasure in passing on these little tit-bits of information?"

An angry flush darkened Flora's cheeks. She replied quickly:

"For a very simple reason. Boris is married. If he sleeps with me, then I'm still his mistress and have nothing to complain of. But if he sleeps with a servant—and that Hobson woman is really nothing more than a servant—then I get angry. By choosing a servant in preference to me, Boris causes me to lose face. So I have no scruples in repeating to you what I consider an unmerited insult to myself. And it gives me a two-fold pleasure to confide in you, because I know I'm placing my revenge in capable hands!"

Borgia was about to congratulate the Chinese girl on her astuteness, when the boy entered the room and bending down, whispered something in Chinese dialect in his mistress's ear. Flora gave a quick order, also in Chinese. She got up.

Please excuse me a moment, Commendatore," she said. "There's a guest called to see me in the next room. I won't be long."



Flora Ying went into the next room, closed the door behind her, and found herself face to face with Mr. Yu, the jeweller from the Nanking Road. She was already acquainted with this gentle-

man, having made one or two expensive purchases from him in the past.

Mr. Yu was a very up-to-date Chinaman, dressed in a well-cut European suit. He was a clever, suave salesman, who combined the polished manners of a jeweller in the Rue de la Paix with the cunning of an Asiatic street merchant. After the customary exchange of kowtows, Mr. Yu explained the object of his visit.

"Miss Ying" he said, "I've come on a very interesting errand, interesting both to you and to myself. Just imagine! This morning a lady called on me quite unexpectedly, requesting me to sell a collection of jewels for her as soon as possible."

"What lady?"

"I believe you know her; Mrs. Hobson, Countess Stolitzine's paid companion. You will perhaps remember that eighteen months ago you sent me two clients who bought several rings from me. The small commission I gave you on that occasion testified to my gratitude. Now I am in a position to offer you a really interesting proposition. Why should you not help me find a buyer for these jewels? You know so many rich Americans and English people living in Shanghai. Naturally, if you found a suitable buyer, I should give you a ten per cent. commission on the deal. As the collection is worth at least twenty-five thousand dollars, your share in the profit would amount to no mean sum!"

Flora's eyes lit up with excitement.

"I would certainly consider the matter," she said. "Where are these treasures to be seen, Mr. Yu?"

"I've brought them with me."

Mr. Yu pulled out of his little black satchel several pieces of jewellery wrapped up in cotton wool. He spread them out on the table. There was a beautiful ring with an oblong-shaped emerald, two heart-shaped diamond clips, and a necklace of green jade and gold, with a large pink crystal pendant in the form of a grinning dragon with ruby eyes.

Flora only just managed to prevent herself jumping up in her chair in amazement. That necklace belonged to the Countess Stolitzine. She had seen Claudette wearing it on several occasions, at the theatre and in various night-clubs. She thought it wiser not to mention the matter to Mr. Yu.

"They certainly are a wonderful collection of jewels," she said. "Where do they come from?"

"It was Mrs. Hobson who brought them to me, but I don't know any more about them, because they weren't bought from my shop. So all I could do was to value them as an expert. In my opinion, their market value is somewhere between thirty-five

and forty thousand dollars. But as the lady said she was in a hurry to sell them, we shall have to be content with twenty-five. Do you think that among your European acquaintances you could possibly . . ."

Flora interrupted Mr. Yu in the middle of his sentence. She begged to be excused for a moment, and returned to the sitting-room, where she explained the whole situation to Paolo. Paolo listened to her story, his ears cocked like those of a wild beast on the prowl. His nostrils appeared to dilate, as though he had already picked up the scent of his prey.

"Don't you think it strange," said Flora, "that Mrs. Hobson should wish to sell Countess Stolitzine's jewels?"

"It's more than strange; it's proof that some mischief is afoot in your friend Boris's household. But are you certain that those jewels belong to Countess Stolitzine?"

"Absolutely positive. I've seen her wearing them over and over again."

"So Countess Stolitzine has given them to Mrs. Hobson to try and sell them for her on the sly. Can you explain this extraordinary behaviour on her part?"

"No, Commendatore, I cannot. Can you?"

"Let's try and work it out logically. A woman who's married to a rich man, and can get anything she requires by merely asking her husband, must need the money for some illegal purpose. If a married woman wants to raise money without her husband knowing, it's obvious she's being secretly blackmailed."

"That's a possible explanation."

"Personally, I don't believe Countess Stolitzine has any black-mailing lover. It's not consistent with her character."

"Well, then, what *is* the explanation?"

"Flora, dear, it's a puzzle which no doubt we'd both like to solve."

Paolo said no more. He thought it wiser to keep to himself—until a later date—the information he had received from Saigon. He did not imagine for a moment that mother and daughter's urgent need for money was caused by the deception they had practised upon Boris. What they *were* frightened of, Paolo could not for the moment determine.

But, in any case, Mr. Yu's visit to Flora was excellently timed. The first step in his campaign of revenge was clearly marked. The mere thought of it gave him infinite satisfaction.

All of a sudden he asked Flora:

"May I see those lovely jewels?"

"Yes, of course you may. I'll bring Yu in to see you."

"No, don't do that. Yu knows me by name. I'd rather my

presence here remained a secret. Ask him if he'd mind entrusting them to you for a moment to show to a friend."

"Have you a client in mind?"

"Yes."

Flora left the room and came back with the jewels which she spread out on the sofa. Paolo looked closely at them, nodding his head wisely.

"Yes, they're certainly valuable," he said. "That jade necklace is quite unique. There can't be another like it anywhere. How much does Yu want for it?"

"He told me it was worth at least six thousand dollars."

"Well, Flora dear, I've already found a buyer for that necklace."

"One of your friends?"

"No, a woman."

"Who?"

"You, of course."

Flora looked at Paolo in utter astonishment.

"But I can't afford it," she said. "I don't know what you mean!"

"I'm offering it to you as a present."

The hard-bitten Flora actually blushed with delight. It was such an unexpected offer.

"But my dear, dear Commendatore, what can I say?"

"Just nothing at all. It's quite natural. You've done me a good turn, in exchange for which I give you this necklace. We're now quits. I make one condition, however. You must take the first opportunity of wearing it in public. Think what a nice little 'come-back' you'll have on Boris for treating you so cavalierly. You wanted to teach him a lesson; well, here's your chance!"

Flora was radiant with joy. She fastened the necklace round her neck and took a good look at herself in the glass.

"Oh, it's wonderful," she said.

Paolo watched her complacently.

"Countess Stolitzine's necklace on the shoulders of Flora Ying. All done in a moment, with a wave of the wand. I must confess, it's a conjuring trick that appeals to me not a little!"

"I'm crazy with excitement to be seen wearing it in public," chirruped Flora.

"But for Heaven's sake don't tell a soul that it's a present from me. I'll give you one of my cheques, and you can pay Yu with a cheque drawn from your own bank. If your beloved Boris shows astonishment at seeing you with the necklace round your pretty neck, you can tell him you saved up your money and bought it from Yu yourself."

"But Boris will ask Yu how he got hold of it at all!"

"That's just what I'm hoping for."

Paolo took his cheque-book from his pocket. Flora kissed him. Her gentle hands caressed his forehead, furrowed with pain. She murmured:

"Paolo, you're an angel."

And Paolo retorted under his breath:

"An angel released from the torments of Hell!"



At half-past six, while Claudette was busy dressing in preparation for the Red Cross Ball, Magali sat impatiently watching the clock. It had been agreed that Mr. Yu was to return the jewels at seven, and that Magali would give them back to him the following day.

Magali had spent the rest of the afternoon calming down Kiwi and Uncle Larry. She had assured them of the success of her persuasive powers, and that Boris was bound to consent to pensioning off Uncle Larry with 25,000 dollars. The transaction would be managed very discreetly, Magali said, in order to save appearances. Uncle Larry had replied that he didn't care a damn how the transaction was managed so long as he got his money.

Magali, certain of having gained a few hours' respite in that quarter, was feverishly awaiting the return of the jewels. At a quarter-past seven she put through a call to Mr. Yu's shop. There was no reply.

Claudette came along to her mother's room.

"Mother," she said anxiously, "why haven't the jewels arrived? Are you sure Mr. Yu understood the arrangement?"

"Yes, of course he did."

"Boris is dressing in his room. He'll come in at any moment to see how I'm getting on. Look at me! I feel absolutely naked in this dress without anything to put round my neck."

"Oh, keep calm, child, for Heaven's sake. Can't you see my nerves are all on edge?"

The boy came in to ask if Missi would like to drink a cocktail with Master before going out. Claudette told him to say she was not yet ready.

The two women looked anxiously at each other. They shared the same desperate secret. All attenuating circumstances apart, they knew in their inner minds that they were on the wrong path. Magali's first lie, that evening at the *Topaze*, when she had in-

vented the "Baroness de Mauchamp," had led to yet other lies, and further deceits, until they had got themselves hopelessly imprisoned in a web of their own making.

The time was long past when Magali could lay bare her soul in her lover's arms. Now she must endure the burden of her double-dealing, a burden which hung upon her spirit like a leaden weight.

The clock struck half-past seven.

Once more the boy appeared, this time with a message that a Chinese gentleman was waiting downstairs, and wished to speak with Missi Hobson. Magali, tense with agitation, told the boy to show him up at once. There entered one of Mr. Yu's employees, carrying in his hand a sealed packet and a letter. Magali gave him a Chinese dollar, and he retired bowing. She tore open the letter which read thus:

DEAR MRS. HOBSON,

I have good news for you. I have already found a buyer for the jade necklace. It has been paid for cash down. I am holding the sum of 6,000 dollars at your disposal.

In accordance with your instructions, I am returning you the remaining jewels, and beg you to bring them to me to-morrow morning.

I am fully confident that we shall succeed in disposing of the remainder within a few days, and that you will obtain the sum you require.

With my humblest respects,

I remain,

Yours very truly,
Yu.

Magali went white. She passed the letter over to Claudette and proceeded to open the parcel. All the jewels were there. Only the jade necklace was missing. Claudette, dumbfounded, looked at the jewels without daring to touch them. Magali made a gesture of impatience.

"What an idiot," she said. "I told him to find a buyer . . ."

"He's found one quicker than you bargained for!"

"It's a disaster! He should have invented some excuse for not parting with the necklace until to-morrow!"

"Mother, what on earth am I to do?"

"Put on your diamonds, your ring and your bracelet, quick."

"Boris will notice that the necklace is missing!"

"It may be all right if you wind a muslin scarf around your shoulders. Quick, take the black one. It will match your dress."

Claudette did as she was told. No sooner was she fully dressed than Boris entered. He was in excellent spirits.

"My little wife looks marvellous this evening," he said. "Are we ready? Then let's be off. We mustn't keep our guests waiting."

Claudette wrapped her sable coat round her shoulders, and stepped out into the darkness. Boris paused suddenly on the threshold of the front door, as though he had forgotten something. He called out:

"My cigarettes! I knew I'd left something behind. Magali, see if there are any in that little black onyx box in the hall."

As she was searching, he came up close to her and whispered in her ear:

"Darling, meet me at our little flat at eleven o'clock to-night. There'll be an enormous crowd, and I'll slip away unnoticed. I must have you to myself for a while."

And before she had time to answer, he hastily put his arms around her and pressed a warm kiss upon her lips.

XIX

THE ball in aid of the Red Cross at the Berkeley Hotel was destined to be the last brilliant social gathering before the outbreak of the Pacific war.

The various Consulates were represented. Each table had its national flag rising above the other decorations. Count Stolitzine's table was between those of Great Britain and the United States—a table for twelve, with a centre piece of red roses and gladioli.

Claudette did the honours of the evening. On her right she had a retired South American diplomat, and on her left a British armament manufacturer. At nine o'clock the orchestra started to play, and soon there were at least three hundred guests in the middle of the floor. The retired diplomat invited Claudette to join the throng.

Boris danced with his neighbour Madame Aguilar, whose husband had been Consul at the Spanish Legation in Peiping. While dancing he exchanged greetings with his various friends. There was Fernand Broutillon in the arms of Madame Grace-Ho, and Charles Appenzell cheek to cheek with Mireille Dargens. Harold Flyn had discarded his usual partner in favour of the Marquise de Casa Mello.

There was something hysterical, something tense in the

atmosphere of revelry that night. All the white inhabitants of Shanghai, that magic city lying under the yoke of the Japanese invasion, felt that their presence was no longer desirable, and that they were dancing on the edge of a volcano.

Suddenly, in the stagnant sea of couples pressed one against the other, in this pudding of human flesh, Boris found himself face to face with Flora Ying.

It was no surprise to him to see her there. After all, the Red Cross Ball was open to the public. You had but to pay your entrance fee of ten dollars, and you were in. From the erotic point of view, too, Flora's presence caused Boris no embarrassment. There was a "gentleman's agreement" between them, and that was that. Flora, as a well-trained concubine, knew her place. She asked no more from Boris than he could afford.

But Boris was startled for a totally different reason. He could not take his eyes off the dazzling jade and gold necklace which she wore around her neck. It was impossible to mistake it for any other. Those alternating green and gold stones, that pink crystal Buddha pendant with ruby eyes—there were no two similar necklaces in the world.

Boris searched his mind for a possible explanation. Flora smiled an enigmatic smile which only increased his bewilderment and irritation. When the band stopped playing, Boris led his partner back to her table, and immediately went off in search of Flora Ying. He invited her to have a liqueur with him at the bar. When they were out of range of curious ears, he asked, pointing at the necklace:

"Who gave you that?"

Flora, with the same enigmatic smile upon her face, enjoying Boris's discomfiture, murmured with downcast eyes:

"My mother!"

Boris, with an irritable gesture, said:

"Come on now; don't be stupid. I'm not referring to your breasts. I mean that necklace of yours."

"Oh! My necklace? Why, I bought it myself!"

"No, you didn't. It's my wife's necklace. And what's it doing round your neck, may I ask?"

Flora raised her eyes, and looked at Boris with such a sweet innocent expression on her face, that any other man would have been taken in.

"What?" she said. "This your wife's necklace? That's absurd!"

"I bought it for her myself in Hong-Kong a year ago. There's no other necklace like it in China."

"Well, apparently there is. Mine proves it!"

"Where did you buy it?"

"At Yu's place."

"Who's Yu?"

"The jeweller in the Nanking Road. You must know him."

"No, I don't know him. And how is it possible that the gentleman in question should have Claudette's necklace for sale?"

"You'll have to ask him that question yourself. I thought the necklace pretty, so I bought it."

"What with?"

"With my money, of course!"

"You know perfectly well you haven't got enough to buy a necklace like that!"

"Do you suppose Mr. Yu gave it me as a present? If you're in any doubt, ask him yourself. I don't suppose he'll have any objection to showing you my cheque."

Boris was speechless. He didn't know what to say. Emptying his glass of Chartreuse, he got up, making as if to leave. But Flora's little angel voice called him back. She fired her Parthian shot.

"Boris," she said, "you're probably right. There may be only one necklace like this in China."

"What d'you mean by that?"

"It's quite easy. Take a good look at your wife. If *she's* not wearing the necklace, then *I* must be. Simple, darling, isn't it?"

Suddenly Boris recalled to mind that from the moment of their arrival in the Hotel, Claudette had kept a black muslin scarf wound tightly round her neck. He went back to his table. Approaching Claudette from behind, he drew level with her chair—then suddenly slipped his hand underneath her scarf. Claudette gave a scream, and whipped round:

"Oh, Boris," she said. "It's you. What a fright you gave me!"

"There's nothing to be frightened of! You're not wearing your necklace, so there's no danger of it being stolen."

Claudette's neighbour, the retired Minister, made his excuses and went off to dance. Claudette, terrified, got up to dance with her husband, feeling like a trapped bird in his arms. They danced a few steps together in silence. Eventually Boris sprang the fatal question upon her:

"And why, my love, are you not wearing my necklace this evening?"

Claudette already had her answer pat:

"Magali discovered that the clip was not working properly. She was frightened of my losing it. She must have taken it to be repaired."

"Quite right; quite right."

They went on dancing in silence. Boris was racking his brains for an explanation of the mystery. Suddenly he caught sight of

Flora Ying dancing with a friend at the far end of the room. Slowly he edged Claudette towards her, until the two couples were moving side by side. Boris whispered in his wife's ear:

"Look what Flora Ying's wearing round her neck!"

Claudette at once recognized her jade necklace, and stifled a cry of surprise. How could the Chinese girl have got hold of it so soon? Boris's voice reiterated in her ear:

"It's your necklace, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes, it is."

"There's not another like it in the world. It's the one I gave you, Claudette."

"Yes."

"How can a necklace which Magali took to be repaired suddenly find itself round the neck of Flora Ying?"

"I don't know. Perhaps the jeweller lent it to her. Chinese people sometimes do that sort of thing for one another."

"Yes. That's a good story. But unfortunately Flora Ying has just confessed to me the truth."

Claudette broke out into a cold sweat. This dance was becoming an agony. Boris went on:

"She said a jeweller called Yu had sold it her."

"Sold it!"

"Don't you think it strange that an honest dealer like Mr. Yu should sell a necklace that had been entrusted to him for repair?"

"Yes; it's certainly odd," said Claudette, her voice growing fainter and fainter.

"So remarkable is it," went on Boris, "that I'm going to call on Mr. Yu to-morrow to demand an explanation."

"Boris, I'm tired. Do let's go and sit down!"

They went back to the supper table. Boris noticed how pale Claudette looked under her make-up. He glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to eleven. He whispered in Claudette's ear:

"Darling, I've got an appointment with General Lu-Chi-Wong. Go on entertaining our guests while I'm away. It may be some time before I get free, but don't worry. Order more champagne for our guests."

Claudette nodded meekly. Boris wended his way through the throng of dancers, fetched his fur coat from the cloak-room, and ordered the chauffeur to drop him as usual at the corner of the Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie.



At the moment when the Berkeley Hotel orchestra was striking up its first foxtrot, Paolo Borgia was sitting in his study in the

Avenue Foch, and with the patience of a spider crouching in his web, he awaited the events.

For the first time since his convalescence, there was noticeable an expression of real satisfaction on his face, the sinister satisfaction of a wizard concocting poisons in the dim light of his magic cave. These last twenty-four hours had been rich with unexpected discoveries. First, the report from Saigon, then the interview with Flora Ying and the business of the necklace. His plans for revenge were fitting neatly together; the marionettes were dancing to his tune.

He knew that at that moment Flora Ying would be dancing at the Red Cross Ball, and that her necklace would be causing a sensation.

Paolo's network of espionage worked with smooth efficiency. Neither the Gestapo nor the OGPU could have hatched a better plot. Sitting there, waiting for his spies to act, he passed the time sucking sweets. Henceforth, he was to have complete knowledge of Magali's and Boris's movements. Now, when he looked at his inert, permanently crippled legs, the former frenzied look of despair no longer contorted his features. Stolitzine had ruined his life, it was true. But the *lex talionis* was not made for dogs. Sooner or later, Boris would expiate his crime; his insolence would be brought low. And the thought of Boris humbled in his pride was ecstasy indeed, an ecstasy sipped slowly, with the regretful realization that it could not last for ever.

The telephone bell tinkled through the silence of the room, interrupting Paolo's train of thought. He stretched out his arm to lift up the receiver.

"Hullo," he said.

A voice with an indefinable accent answered:

"Is that you, Signor Commendatore?"

"Yes; speaking."

"Mrs. Hobson left the *Petit Trianon* a moment ago, at half-past ten to be precise. I followed her. She was driven to Number 155, Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie."

"Good. Keep on the watch there, and let me know if anything interesting occurs."

Paolo hung up the receiver. Things were beginning to move. The detective who had just spoken had informed him earlier of Count and Countess Stolitzine's departure at eight o'clock for the ball. Knowing that Flora Ying was also to be present, he realized that the affair of the necklace was bound to have melodramatic results, such as his soul rejoiced in. But he hadn't foreseen that Boris would have the audacity to slip away from the ball and meet Magali on the sly in their little flat.

This last telephone message had been instructive in that it seemed to prove that Magali was carrying on her love-affair with Boris behind her daughter's back. This promised an added flavour to Paolo's cup of revenge. He saw it clear before his eyes, in the fullness of its tragedy.

He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes to eleven. Again the telephone rang, and yet another voice addressed him in an undertone.

"Hullo, sir," the voice said. "Count Stolitzine's just left the Berkeley, and driven off in his car towards the French Concession."

Paolo again hung up the receiver. The conclusion was obvious, and the secret meetings of the two lovers proved beyond a doubt. The telephone rang a third time. Now it was the first man's voice again.

"Hullo, Signor Commendatore! I've just seen Count Stolitzine enter Number 155, Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie. What am I to do now?"

"That will do for this evening," answered Paolo. "You can go home."

For the third time in succession Paolo put down the receiver. He clapped his hands to call the boy, and gave his orders.

"Boy, get me my fur coat, and tell the chauffeur to come round with the car. I'm going out in five minutes."

"Yes, master; can do."



A few minutes later, Paolo, huddled up in the corner of his car, was being driven along towards the Berkeley Hotel. He had made up his mind to be present at the winding up of the day's events. The grand finale should be really worthy of him.

The car stopped in front of the hotel. Paolo, with the help of the porter, limped into the hall. There he stood, leaning on his crutches, watching the throng of dancers through the open doorway of the ballroom. Catching the head-waiter's eye, he called him over and slipping a dollar bill into his hand, said:

"Do me a favour. Go into the ballroom to Mr. Grittsen's table. You will find among his guests a certain Miss Flora Ying. Whisper discreetly in her ear that Mr. Borgia's waiting in the reading-room and would like to have a word with her. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

Paolo went into the reading-room and seated himself in an arm-chair. The room was empty. In a few moments Flora entered, breathless, quite astonished that Paolo should have paid her this

midnight visit. She sat down beside him, and told him the whole story from beginning to end. Paolo beamed.

"Bravissimo! . . . Magnifico!" he said. "Where is the Stolitzine at this moment?"

"At her table, entertaining her guests."

"Good. Flora, to-night you've had the joy and satisfaction of showing yourself off in the Countess's necklace. Would you like to enjoy an even greater satisfaction?"

"Yes, I would indeed. But what?"

"Listen carefully."

Paolo whispered something to her in a lengthy undertone. Flora nodded excitedly, taking in every word. She seemed to be acting in advance the rôle that Paolo had in mind for her. When he had finished giving her her instructions, he slipped a key into her hand. Flora popped it at once into her bag.

"Can I really rely on you, Flora?"

"Commendatore . . . ! This morning you gave me a beautiful necklace. This evening you're offering me a jewel even dearer to my heart, an opportunity for revenge. Thank you."

Paolo got up. He murmured:

"My car's at your disposal. I'll go home by rickshaw."



Flora Ying returned to the ball. Her eyes searched the room for Countess Stolitzine. Eventually she spotted her dancing with one of her guests. Before Claudette could get back to her table, Flora intercepted her on the dance-floor:

"Countess Stolitzine?" she said, "You recognize me?"

Claudette was amazed to be thus boldly accosted, and on this of all evenings.

"Yes. You're Miss Flora Ying, are you not?"

"May I speak to you privately for a moment?"

Claudette followed the Chinese girl towards the exit. She kept looking at her out of the corner of her eye. Her husband's ex-mistress, speaking to her on this of all evenings! It was unbelievable.

Flora, in honeyed tones, asked her casually:

"Where is Boris to-night?"

"Oh, he'll be returning at any minute. Why do you ask?"

"Because there's something I want to talk to you about without his knowing. I've an urgent message for you from Mrs. Hobson. It's about your necklace, or, I should say, the necklace which was yours till yesterday."

"A message from Mrs. Hobson?"

"Yes, she telephoned me asking me to come and see her at once. She said you were to come as well."

"Why me?"

Claudette, on her guard, was frightened to give anything away. She repeated:

"Why did Mrs. Hobson want to see me?"

"You probably know the answer to that better than I do." The Chinese girl gave Claudette a sly look. "Perhaps Mrs. Hobson is more inquisitive than you. Perhaps she wants to know why I'm wearing this jade necklace and not you."

"And she sent a message through *you* to *me*?"

"Maybe there's some secret which she prefers your husband not to know!"

Flora's superior little voice stung Claudette to a fury.

"I'm going to telephone Mrs. Hobson myself to verify your story."

"That would be quite useless, my dear. Mrs. Hobson's not at home."

Claudette ran to the nearest telephone box, and asked to be put through to the *Petit Trianon*. Number three boy answered that Missi Hobson had gone out.

Flora Ying, in ever more dulcet tones, said:

"Are you convinced at last, my dear? I can promise you that Mrs. Hobson was very anxious that you should come with me. Come, my dear. The car will take us there in less than five minutes."

Claudette still hesitated. Why should her mother not have telephoned her herself if she had thought it really necessary to have a discussion *à trois* with Flora Ying on the subject of the necklace. Perhaps she really *was* frightened of Boris knowing about it. Finally she came to a decision; it was better to clear the matter up once and for all.

"Very well, Miss Ying," she said, "I'll go with you."

The two women left the hotel, and stepped into Paolo's car. Flora Ying, in her squeaky little voice, told the chauffeur where he was to drive them.

"Number 155, Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie."

Claudette gave a start of surprise.

"Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie?" she repeated. "Who on earth lives there?"

"Don't ask me too much," said Flora Ying, smiling. "I'm only obeying Mrs. Hobson's orders."

The car drove towards the French Concession, passed a Japanese sentry post, and arrived finally in a deserted street bordered by

little gardens and semi-detached villas. The chauffeur drew up in front of Number 155. It was a three-storied house, each floor let out as a separate furnished apartment.

Flora alighted. She felt in her bag and produced a key, which she handed to Claudette. Claudette's bewilderment was apparent on her face, so the Chinese girl explained:

"Mrs. Hobson sent me the key by a messenger-boy. It's Number Two Flat, on the ground floor. Go on ahead while I give the chauffeur his instructions."

Claudette entered the little hall. There was Number Two Flat all right; the number was written clearly on the door. Flora Ying followed her into the hall.

"Go on in," she said, "I'll follow behind you."

Claudette turned the key in the lock, and opened the door. She found herself standing in a little ante-room lit by a dark blue shaded lamp. It smelt partly of incense and partly of European scent. There was no sound to be heard anywhere.

Suddenly she heard the door close behind her. Flora Ying had disappeared. At last Claudette heard a woman's voice speaking from the far end of the flat; it sounded muffled, as though coming from the other side of a curtain or tapestry. It was her mother's voice, all right. Reassured, Claudette felt her way along the passage . . .



Boris, having left the Berkeley Hotel, found Magali waiting for him in their little apartment. The scene of their secret trysts was a large room furnished in Chinese fashion, with a big, ornate red and gold bed in the purest Ning-Po style. The room contained a black divan piled high with cushions, and two aquariums lighted by a row of little green electric bulbs which made the interior glow like undersea rocks and caves. Exotic fish swam to and fro in this submarine jungle; "widow fish" floated about trailing musliny black tails behind them; transparent rainbow-fish darted here and there; "sucking fish" opened and closed their gaping mouths, and four-footed fish, captured off the coast of Malabar, walked solemnly along the sandy depths.

Boris was very proud of his collection. He loved to lie full length upon the sofa, his head resting on Magali's lap, watching the lazy movements of these voluptuous creatures of the deep.

To-night he clasped Magali in his arms.

"Darling," he said, "you don't know what joy it is to steal an hour alone with you in peace. My head's still buzzing with that frightful jazz, that endless hum of conversation. The atmosphere

to-night was tense, everyone wondering what to-morrow would hold in store for us. For the last few weeks the Japanese have been going about with the conspiratory air of men who've just set light to a time-bomb fuse. God knows what devilry they're going to practise on us."

All the while he talked, Boris was gazing in admiration at Magali's naked shoulders. To-night she was lightly clad in a blue satin kimono. But her mind was not at rest. She was unable to respond to her lover's caresses. A sense of impending disaster hung upon her. For one thing there was the troublesome business of the necklace. She foresaw further difficulties when the absence of the other jewels was discovered. Lies, more lies. Was she fated to endure the misery of floundering for ever in deceit, evasions, guilty silences?

Boris's kisses that night had the bitter-sweet flavour of slow poison. Suddenly his mood changed. Lifting his head from the pillow, he said in a rather worried voice:

"Oh, Magali, there's something I forgot to tell you. Do you know who I met to-night at the ball? Flora Ying, that ex-Chinese girl of mine. And of all extraordinary things she was wearing the jade necklace I brought back with me last year as a present to Claudette. Claudette explained that you had given it to Mr. Yu, the jeweller, to have the clasp refitted. But why on earth should Yu have sold it to Flora Ying?"

Magali was caught with her back to the wall. She quickly wriggled out:

"Boris, it was my fault entirely. You know that Claudette is a superstitious little thing at heart. She'd got hold of the idea that the necklace was bringing her bad luck. So I suggested to her quite simply that she should sell it, and rid herself of its baneful influence."

"What an absurd notion!"

"I regret now having done what I did. She ought to have kept the priceless thing—after all, it was a present from her husband. But there you are! It's impossible to argue with superstitious people. Some of us believe in the evil eye, some don't. Boris, please don't hold it against me. I'm so dreadfully sorry if I've caused you pain by doing what I did."

"Of course I don't hold it against you. It's not so terribly serious, after all."

"Truly? You're really not angry with me, Boris?"

"Darling, look at me!"

His hand caressed the back of her neck. She read devotion in his eyes, and sank back reassured. The perilous headland had been rounded. Once more they were in smooth waters. Magali's

quick imagination had seized as usual upon the simplest, the most plausible explanation. She twined her arms round Boris's neck. Their lips met in a kiss which once more pledged their secret understanding, their passionate desire for one another.

Magali murmured:

"Boris, I adore you."

And Boris replied in a voice husky with passion:

"And I can no longer live without you. It's you I'm really married to!"

All of a sudden, the curtains of the bedroom were drawn apart.

Claudette appeared, standing like a white ghost in the aperture. She looked down at the two lovers lying side by side, their bodies entwined, their lips sealed. And before the horror-stricken Magali had had time to disengage herself, Claudette's cry rang through the room.

It was the despairing cry of an animal struck through the heart:

"Mother . . . !"

XX

THE sight of her mother in her husband's arms came as an atrocious shock to Claudette. To have it broken to her so cruelly, so brutally that there was a secret relationship between Boris and Magali was such an agony that the blood rushed to her head, suffocating her.

This mental anguish was greater than any physical suffering could possibly be.

Her mother, her darling mother, whom she had always looked up to and admired! Her companion from her earliest youth, her confidante, her guardian angel! And now she had actually stolen her own husband from her! To have found him in this cheap furnished apartment, scarcely ten minutes from the *Petit Trianon*. It was one of those squalid, sordid disclosures which the mind simply refuses to face. The sudden vision of mother and husband indulging in a secret love-affair was intolerable enough to make Claudette lose faith in the goodness of the world, in beauty, sunshine, affection and kindness.

Claudette held on to the tapestry until dizziness finally overcame her. Then she slumped down on to the floor in a heap.

Magali had rushed to her side to prevent her from falling. She went down on her knees, lifting her daughter's head on to her lap.

"Quick," she said, "call a doctor."

Boris was also on his knees beside Claudette. They decided that it was better to carry her at once to the *Petit Trianon*, and telephone the doctor from there.

Boris and Magali between them carried the senseless Claudette to the waiting car. In a quarter of an hour she was at home in bed, lying still unconscious. The head physician at the French Hospital, Doctor Sarrazin, came to attend to her. He soon revived her by giving her an injection of camphorated oil. As he went out he said to Boris:

"I'll be back to-morrow morning, to make a proper diagnosis of the case. In the meantime you must leave her alone to rest and sleep."

Boris and Magali went into Claudette's sitting-room, closing the door behind them. They faced each other for the first time since that dreadful scene, when Claudette's cry, like a sudden thunder-clap breaking the silence of a clear summer night, had forcibly interrupted their embrace.

Claudette's cry had in one moment torn down the false *décor* which her mother had so painfully and elaborately erected. There she stood, the guilty Magali, face to face with the man she had deliberately deceived. She felt naked and ashamed, like a woman standing in the dock, waiting to hear the judge pronounce sentence. She dared not even look her lover in the face.

Boris, for his part, felt quite unlike a judge with the black cap on his head. He felt deflated, like a man who, for the first time in his amorous career, has suffered a severe jolt. He was pointing no accusing finger at his mistress. He was staring at her dumbfounded, the very picture of mortification, of a man outwitted by his lady's wiles. It had been quite simply proved to him that the treachery of a scheming mother, who was also an ardent mistress, could reach unsuspected depths.

Magali, unable to face the situation, hurriedly left the room.

Boris remained a few minutes alone, trying to collect his thoughts. Claudette's despairing cry "Mother . . ." still rang in his ears. The discovery that Magali was his wife's mother did not shock him from the moral point of view. The Stolitziens, for generations past, had held conventions cheap. His ancestor, bed-mate to the Empress Catherine, had bequeathed to his descendants no inherent Puritanism. To his way of thinking, there was

no stigma attached to sleeping with both mother and daughter. Rather did it flatter his pretensions as a Don Juan. What really stung his self-esteem was to have been so completely outwitted. That a woman could sincerely love him, and give such ample proof of it, and yet at the same time be capable of making him a laughing-stock, was no great tribute to his intelligence.

Essentially his pride was hurt. That he, the great Boris Stolitine, breaker of hearts, prince among lady-killers, should have been gulled like any ordinary *petit bourgeois*! No! That was intolerable! He sprang angrily to his feet.

The matter must be properly dealt with. He now saw clearly in his mind how best to tackle Magali, and show her he was not the fool she took him for.

He went along the passage, and knocked on her bedroom door. There was no reply. Entering, he found her lying full length upon the bed, pale and exhausted. Point-blank he questioned her:

"Magali! Are you upset because your daughter's disclosed your secret? There's no need for that, you know. I knew it all the time."

Magali sprang up with a start, amazed at the mocking note in Boris's voice.

"What on earth do you mean?" she said.

Boris sauntered up to the bed, his hands in his trouser pockets. His face bore the ironical smile of a gambler, who, apparently outplayed, ends by turning up the winning card.

"Magali," he explained, "in love, as in war, it's a mistake to underrate the enemy's strength. For two and a half years you've acted a superbly subtle comedy—it would certainly have deceived any man but me. But, alas for you, my dear, I've had more mistresses than you've had lovers. So you didn't have a chance from the start."

Magali could find no words to express her amazement. She felt crippled and helpless before Boris's superior intelligence, and could only gasp:

"You knew!"

Boris's mind worked like lightning. A few minutes' reflection had shown him all the chinks in his armour. At all costs he must prove to this woman that he had never been outdone by her.

"Listen, Magali," he said, "an old campaigner like myself is not so easily deceived. Nevertheless, I congratulate you. A pretty piece of stage-craft! Wonderful construction! Oh, you Provençales with your gifts of imagination! The Baroness de Mauchamp for a start, brought to life with a single wave of the maternal wand! What a delightful invention! But, *en passant*, let me put in one tiny word of criticism. It was bad psychology on your part to

think I should be impressed by a titled widow. I'd just as readily have married Claudette Hobson, and in that way you'd have been saved a great deal of worry and exertion. In any case, the Baroness's forged papers were too good to be true—they were so beautifully done. You must give me that rogue's name and address some time; he might come in useful."

Boris's bantering tone cut Magali to the quick. She groaned:

"Stop, Boris; I can't bear it."

Just another little turn of the screw won't hurt, he thought. Not out of malice, just to satisfy his self-esteem:

"And you yourself, the paid companion! Do you realize how perfect you were in the rôle! Never a word out of place, never a false note! Your talent is amazing!"

Magali's unhappy voice interrupted his banter:

"No," she said. "It's not possible. I can't believe you ever really guessed."

"Well, if I showed nothing, it's because I too can do a bit of acting when I like. You gave me the clue to your *mis-en-scène* when I first started courting you. If you'd been a real *taxi-girl Captain*, admitted into your client's—I beg your pardon—baroness's household, you'd have taken advantage of the situation. Your behaviour was unnaturally noble. A paid companion who knows that the husband fancies her doesn't wait to be told—she snaffles on to him at once. Your altruism was suspicious."

Magali found it very hard to believe that Boris should have accepted the situation in silence. She cried out:

"But Boris, I don't understand. If you knew, why didn't you speak?"

"For your sake."

"Oh . . .!"

"Why not? When one likes a woman, one doesn't wish to destroy her illusions."

"Boris, don't be flippant, please. Our position is tragic enough, God knows. Don't try and make a farce of it."

"Now you're starting to blame me for entering into your little games! Oh dear! Women will always defeat men by their lack of logic!"

"Your cynicism is revolting!"

"Don't get excited, Magali . . . The fact that you were my wife's mother didn't alter my feelings towards you. On the contrary, it brought us still closer together."

"Do you realize what you're saying. It's vile!"

"No, just a case of fifty-fifty . . . At heart you're really furious because I didn't say the day after my marriage to Claudette: 'Now, dearest mother-in-law, the game's all over. We'll keep up

the bluff before the outside world, but actually I know the whole truth. So you can take off all that make-up and relax in peace.'"

"If you really knew the truth, it was your duty to . . . to . . ."

"To go down on my knees and beg your forgiveness for having cheated me?"

The workings of Magali's mind were mysterious and unpredictable. She now began to believe in all sincerity that Boris, her lover, was the cause of all her troubles, and to feel spiteful and vindictive towards him. Her hot Provençal blood began to boil, and, with her natural impetuosity, she flung her grievances in his face:

"If you'd a spark of feeling, you'd be sorry for me instead of standing there accusing me of . . ."

"I'm not accusing you of anything. I proved that when I consented to play your comedy. You wanted to be paid companion to the Countess Stolitzine; did I ever hinder you in any way?"

"If you'd any heart or imagination, you'd have understood my unhappy situation, an exiled, ruined woman, with a daughter whose happiness and security were my one concern. Instead of pestering me with sarcasms, you'd feel sympathy for an unfortunate mother stranded alone in Shanghai, without anyone to befriend her or give her good advice, struggling against poverty, forced to swallow her pride and undertake a shameful job at the *Topaze*. Underneath that outward elegance of yours you're just a brutal Tartar; otherwise you wouldn't have forced me into playing these filthy rôles, these silly acrobatic tricks, these . . ."

"Oh, I see. I'm the guilty party! Magali, you've certainly got a great talent for turning the tables on your opponents. However, there it is! And by the way, talking of acrobatic tricks, can you by chance throw any light on how the jade necklace which I gave Claudette last year suddenly appeared to-night on the shoulders of Flora Ying, at the Red Cross Ball?"

Magali had got up off the bed and was pacing up and down the room, her hands clenched in nervous exasperation. Only two hours previously she had lain in Boris's arms; now she stood looking at him out of the corners of her eyes like an animal at bay. Boris continued:

"Well . . . come on now . . . What about the necklace?"

"What necklace?"

"You know perfectly well what necklace. The jade necklace. I suppose I'm also to blame for Flora Ying's wearing it!"

Boris's irony was not calculated to soothe Magali's exasperation. She became more and more violent.

"Well, if you must know, I sold it to Mr. Yu, the jeweller."

"Oh, so you've taken to selling your daughter's jewellery?"

What for, I wonder? To make a little pocket money for yourself? Good Heavens! One would think I'd denied you something in your life."

"It's that employee of yours, Larry Hobson, who's to blame for that. You gave him the sack, so he came to me for twenty-five thousand dollars."

"A charming family, the Hobsons, I must say! Blackmail, I suppose?"

"I had to keep his mouth shut. He was revenging himself on me because you sacked him."

"Of course, of course. It was cruel of me not to keep a drunken old swindler in my employ. Meanwhile, Yu has gone and resold the necklace to Flora Ying."

"If you hadn't given that Chinese tart of yours so much money, she wouldn't have been able to inflict that humiliation on Claudette."

"I won't have you saying that I pay her."

"Come on, now, don't try and put that stuff over on me."

"I paid off Flora Ying years ago."

"And I don't believe a word of it."

Magali's jealous temper made her very suspicious. Time and again she had had scenes with Boris on the subject of Flora Ying. She cried out in a rage:

"If you're not keeping her, how on earth could she afford to pay that amount for the necklace?"

"That's what I'd like to know myself . . . And there's another thing I'd like to know. How did Claudette discover us in the Rue du Cardinal? Someone must have given us away. Claudette certainly suspected nothing when I left her to-night at the ball."

Suddenly Magali's anger gave way to an uprush of remorse. She pictured poor Claudette lying alone in her room, stunned and disillusioned. She cried out:

"My poor darling child. It's horrible to think of her suffering! That agonized cry of hers; it keeps ringing in my head." Then, turning to Boris, her eyes dark with hatred, she said:

"You had no right to tempt me. It's your fault I gave in to you. I shall never forgive you for that, never!"

In the course of his amorous career, Boris had never taken a woman's curses seriously. To his way of thinking, a woman's loves and hates were mere nervous wave-lengths, to be played about with like the knobs of a radio-set. Having brought Magali to a state of rage, he now wanted to soothe her down again. He felt indulgent towards her bursts of temper, her unfairnesses, her false accusations, her feminine inconsistencies. He caught her in

his arms, as he had so often done during the happy days of their intimacy, crushing her against him.

To Boris, that inveterate pleasure-seeker, that distiller of cynicism, who snapped his fingers at all the cardinal virtues, this tragic turn of events only added fresh flavour to forbidden fruit.

But Magali fought against his kisses. She hissed at him between her teeth:

"Go away . . . Don't ever touch me again."

Taken aback by the fury in her voice, he tried to laugh it off.

"Ho, ho, so Mrs. Hobson's in one of her tantrums!"

"Go away, I tell you."

"Magali darling . . . !"

He seized hold of her dark hair, jerking her head backwards as he loved to do, trying to crush his lips against hers.

She spat in his face.

"Get away! You repel me! . . ." She was screaming at him now.

"Get out of my sight, I say!"

To avoid a scene he let her go. He walked slowly to the door, and, turning round, spoke in a calm voice:

"It's just silly to act like that, Magali. . . . We love each other, you and I. What's the good of pretending. That display of rage didn't ring true. Yesterday I loved you . . . to-night I worship you."

The door closed behind him.

Magali, left alone, fell on her knees beside the bed. The little Louis XVI clock on the mantelpiece ticked away regularly in the silence of the room, a dry accompaniment to her convulsive sobs.

XXI

DOCTOR SARRAZIN left Claudette's room, followed by Magali, who was now gravely concerned about her daughter's state of health. The sudden fever which had attacked her was a bad sign.

"Doctor," said Magali, "I hope it's not serious?"

"Countess Stolitzine's temperature is a hundred and four," answered the doctor. "She has all the symptoms of cerebral fever, occasioned probably by the violent shock you described to me the other evening. There's nothing for it but to have her

transferred in an ambulance to the French Hospital, where she will receive the best possible attention."

"Good Heavens! Cerebral fever! Is it very serious?"

"Everything depends on her powers of resistance. In any case, there's no cause for alarm. We'll very soon have her comfortably settled."

An hour later the ambulance arrived, and Magali drove with her daughter to the French Hospital. Claudette had not uttered a single word since the night of the tragedy. She had barely recovered consciousness, and had slept the whole of the following day and night. On the Monday morning, the attack of fever had confused her brain, rendering her speech incoherent. So Boris and Magali were still ignorant of the nature of the man or woman who had brought her to the Rue du Cardinal la Vigerie.

Magali remained at the hospital till five that afternoon. Claudette's temperature was rising. Tears of sorrow and remorse coursed down her face as she watched the pallor of her daughter's face. During her twenty years of married life with Ben Hobson, Magali had endured the ordinary little dramas that married couples have to face, jealous scenes and recriminations. But all these things were nothing compared with this latest catastrophe. Magali had spent two sleepless nights watching her daughter and meditating on her own misfortunes. Fate had used her cruelly. That Boris had always known that it was Claudette Hobson he was marrying and not the Baroness de Mauchamp concerned her much less than Claudette's tragic discovery of her intimacy with him.

When mother and daughter have lived for many years in perfect trust and understanding, have shared each other's pleasures and vexations, laughed and cried together, confessed secrets and withheld no confidences, a sudden act of deception such as Magali had practised on Claudette appears in a more odious light. The very thought of Claudette's first return to consciousness and the look of horror on her face as she gazed at her mother with the clear knowledge of her guilt drove Magali into a state of desperation.

The hospital nurse, moved by Magali's unhappiness, tried to encourage her:

"It's not so serious as all that, Mrs. Hobson. . . . You mustn't give up hope. Your daughter will recover—perhaps sooner than you think."

Magali could not reveal the true cause of her grief. She dried her eyes and left the room, saying that she would return at about ten o'clock. Walking miserably along the hospital corridor, she happened to look out of one of the windows. A torrent of rain was

falling over the city. Suddenly, owing to the depression of spirits under which she suffered, her mind reverted to those three days of waiting in the Hotel Imperial on their first arrival in Shanghai, when the skies were likewise grey, but when the minds of both herself and Claudette were filled with happy anticipations, free to build castles in the air, to construct stone by stone the enchanted palace of their dreams.

Suddenly she caught sight of a group of people talking excitedly at the far end of the corridor; a nurse, a patient and a visitor to the hospital. Magali heard one of them say:

"I swear to you it's true!"

"How do you know?"

"Well, I was having a drink at the International Bar when Wang, the secretary of the editor of the *Shanghai Daily News*, came up and told me."

"Where did they make their attack?"

"At Pearl Harbour."

Magali approached the group. The hospital patient recognized her, and said:

"Mrs. Hobson, it's war, I'm afraid."

"Between whom?"

"Between Japan and the U.S.A. Early this morning the Japs suddenly attacked Pearl Harbour, in Hawaii, while their diplomats were still politely bowing and scraping in Washington. Gangsterism is now the order of the day in International affairs. They've destroyed practically the whole of the American fleet."

"They've actually dared . . . !"

"Another stab in the back. It's very much in vogue now, since the day when Mussolini attacked our poor defeated France."

"So the war's really started!"

"You're American, aren't you, Mrs. Hobson?"

"Yes, by marriage."

"Well, the poor devils at Pearl Harbour may thank those of their fellow-countrymen who for years have been making fortunes supplying Japan with iron and steel. The Japs are returning them their gifts through the cannon's mouth, it seems. At least those Americans who left last week for home by the S.S. *Oregon* can thank their lucky stars—and stripes! They only just got off in time!"

Magali returned to the *Petit Trianon*. The threat of a Pacific war worried her far less than her own personal tragedy.

As she entered the house, the boy on duty informed her that two people were waiting for her in the drawing-room.

"Who are they?" said Magali.

"Mr. and Mrs. Larry Hobson."

Magali gave a start of surprise. She was in no mood to spar with Uncle Larry, still less with that concubine of his. She burst open the door; there in very fact sat her brother- and sister-in-law, poised genteelly on the edge of two gilt chairs. Uncle Larry, wearing a blue serge suit, shaved and cravatted, had obviously got himself up to play the part of a gentleman crook. Kiwi, in a long black satin dress, completed the picture.

Magali addressed them abruptly:

"What are you two doing here?"

Kiwi opened her mouth to speak, but Uncle Larry, in his rôle of heavy father, interrupted her:

"Shut that mouth of yours, Kiwi . . . ! I'm the one to speak in my nephew's house." Then, turning to Magali, he continued: "My dear, there are limits to everyone's patience. Since I first warned you of my intentions, you've taken no steps at all. I'm still waiting for a message from Boris, either telling me I'm reinstated, or else sending me the compensatory money we agreed upon. Your lack of goodwill, Magali, has forced us to put our foot in it. That's just what you wanted, I suppose!"

Magali, boiling with rage, controlled herself sufficiently to reply:

"Is that all you've got to say to me?"

"Yes. Out of personal loyalty to you we gave you warning in advance. Unfortunately you did not help us. So now we intend to wait here until Count Stolitzone returns. The moment he enters the room, I shall say to him . . ." Uncle Larry paused a moment like a wise old owl, and continued: "I shall say to him, 'I'm your uncle, because Claudette is Magali's daughter.'"

The situation was both tragic and ludicrous. In ordinary times Magali would have burst into a wild fit of laughter. But to-day she could not see the funny side of things. She advanced towards the ridiculous pair, crying out at them:

"So you really imagined I was going to beg Count Stolitzone to pay you to keep a silent tongue? Well, you were mistaken, both of you. Your threats to tell my son-in-law that Claudette was my daughter were perfectly absurd. Why, he's known it for years!"

Uncle Larry looked at Kiwi. Magali's counter-attack seemed to have struck him all of a heap. He stammered out:

"Wha-wha-what? Boris knows that Claudette . . . ?"

"He's always known it. So you were sadly deluded if you thought you could get money out of me as the price of silence. I set a trap for you, that's all; it wasn't very difficult! I wanted to find out how low you'd sunk."

Kiwi, less easily deflated than her lord and master, now broke in:

"Ah yes! You say that . . . But it's only a piece of bluff!"

"You think it's bluff? You dare to doubt my word? You filthy little Sou-Chow guttersnipe! I'm going to teach you a lesson, once and for all."

Magali sprang to the telephone. She asked to be put through to Boris's office on the Bund. The moment she heard his voice, she shouted out:

"Boris, I've just had a visit from Larry Hobson and his Chinese woman. They've come like a couple of double-crossing black-mailers to remind me that if I don't pay them their twenty-five thousand dollars, they'll tell you what you already know about Claudette. Have you anything to say to them?"

Boris's curt voice answered down the wire:

"Call Hobson to the telephone!"

Uncle Larry had heard the summons. Rather gingerly he picked up the receiver:

"Hullo . . .! Hullo!"

Once more Boris's trenchant voice sounded down the line:

"Is that you, Hobson? Can you hear me distinctly?"

"Yes, skipper."

"Very well then, I give you three minutes to clear out of my house. You know I could have had you gaoled for that cocaine business in Cheng-Yu. I refrained out of pity for you, old drunkard that you are. But now I warn you. If you don't clear out of Shanghai at once, I'll have you arrested by the police of the French Concession for attempted blackmail."

Boris hung up the receiver. Kiwi had also heard his threatening voice down the wire. Uncle Larry took up his hat, signalling to Kiwi to follow him. Magali watched them in silence as they left the room. She laid all her troubles at their door. Had they not threatened her with exposure, she would not have put the jewels on the market, and Saturday's tragedy might never have occurred.

She went up to her room.

On her bureau lay an envelope addressed to her, bearing the post-mark of Shanghai Central. She looked at it askance, with a vague feeling of uneasiness. Opening it, she found inside a white sheet upon which were glued seven rows of printed letters, cut out of some newspaper. The whole thing reeked of anonymity. The letters were arranged in vertical lines, to be read from right to left, like Chinese characters.

This threatening message had a strange effect on Magali. She suddenly started to tremble. It was the fear of the unknown, of a prophecy which arrived just at the moment when the future appeared most dark, fear of the mysterious individual who had

brought Claudette to No. 155, fear of those nameless people who knew that Claudette was her daughter.

H	Y	G	S	A	A	S
A	O	H	O	F	B	H
S	U	T	N	F	O	A
	R	E	I	A	U	N
O	P	R	N	I	T	G
N	U	K	L	R		H
L	N	N	A	W	Y	A
Y	I	O	W	I	O	I
J	S	W	Y	T	R	K
U	H	S	O	H		N
S	M		U		L	O
T	E	I	R	Y	O	W
	N	T		O	V	S
B	T		D	U	E	
E		T	A			
G		O	U			
U		O				
N						

Like a criminal hurrying down a lonely alley, haunted by the ghosts of his victims, Magali, sitting in her room with the twilight slowly creeping round her, felt herself ringed about by threatening shadows fiercely intent on compassing her doom.



The two rickshaws dropped Uncle Larry and Kiwi at their house in Amoy Road.

Uncle Larry who till this moment had remained speechless, rushed up to his studio followed by Kiwi, who kept chewing away at her little ball of venom, ready to spit. Uncle Larry angrily broke open a bottle of whisky, poured himself out a large glass, and at last exploded:

"You bloody little fool . . . You've gone and mucked up the whole thing!"

Kiwi who was aggressive, like so many of the Sou-Chow women, bristled up like an angry cat:

"Oh I! I! So it's I'm to blame is it? I like that! You're so drunk you don't know what you're saying!"

"Shut up, you little bitch . . .! If you hadn't suggested forcing

up the price, if I'd been content with five thousand dollars, Boris'd have coughed it up all right, just out of sympathy."

"But I don't want any sympathy from a rat who sleeps with his wife's Number One."

"God in Heaven, what a mess!"

Kiwi tried to stop Uncle Larry emptying his glass. He gave her a great shove in the face, sending her reeling across the room. She shrieked:

"You great brute you!"

"I'll go to hell before I take your advice again."

"Now, then, stop it! You're drunk already!"

"Say that again!"

"I said you were just a drunken brute, incapable of earning an honest living."

"You filthy slut!"

"You—bastard!"

Once again Larry struck his mistress in the face. Kiwi, mad with rage, flung herself at him, fighting tooth and nail. She scratched him on both cheeks till the blood was streaming down his face. He seized her round the waist like a wrestler. She bit him. He shook her up and down, to and fro like a young tree. They rolled about together on the floor, while easels, trestle-boards, paint-pots, picture frames leapt about in the air.

The din of battle roused all the household pets. Svengali, the cat, his tail erect like an exclamation mark, miowed from the top of the cupboard. Mephisto, the gibbon, jumped like a demon on to an old oak beam, his long hairy arms reaching heavenwards in imprecation. Rasputin, the parrot, in a state of wild excitement, spun round and round in circles on his perch, stopping every now and then to scream "Kiss me . . . Danke schön . . . Mama mia . . . *Couche couche!*" The quietest onlooker of the lot was Hamlet, the chameleon. Hamlet didn't speak, but he was by no means indifferent to this Homeric struggle. Powerless to emulate the eloquence of Rasputin, he showed his horror by changing from grey to green, from green to violet, from violet to orange and from orange to sapphire blue. He had ceased to be a chameleon—he was a kaleidoscope.

Only one soul appeared to be indifferent to the affray, and that was Mr. Chang, who was seated in the kitchen, visible through the half-open door.

Mr. Chang, her ladyship's laundry-man, was calmly eating his evening meal, working away with his chopsticks, stuffing rice into his great gargoyle mouth. Impervious to the quarrels of the household, wise as to the relative nature of domestic bliss, he sat there belching quietly to himself over his blue china pudding-bowl.

XXII

PAOLO BORGIA, with the help of his boy, donned his black morning coat. While the Chinaman was tying up his master's shoe-laces, the radio was giving out sensational news.

War had just been declared between the United States, Japan, Germany and Italy. The fireworks had spread to the Eastern Hemisphere, set alight by the treacherous attack on Pearl Harbour.

Paolo was beaming with contentment. Not directly owing to the extension of the conflict, although his friendly relations with the Japanese assured him preferential treatment. He was beaming because his personal affairs had taken the very best possible course.

Tying his grey bow tie in front of the mirror, he made a mental note of his achievements to date. Flora Ying had caused a sensation with her necklace at the Red Cross Ball. She had subsequently led Claudette, the innocent lamb, to the slaughter. The sight of her mother in her husband's arms had apparently come as such a shock to her that according to Paolo's spies she had had to be taken to the French Hospital.

A nice little stir-up in the duck-pond! Paolo with his vivid Latin imagination, pictured Boris's astonishment at finding himself the lover of his wife's mother. He knew the Russian's secret wishes. When Boris discovered that he had married the daughter of the ex-Captain of the *taxi-girls* at the *Topaze*, he would scarcely be uplifted in his own eyes.

Moreover, Paolo Borgia, who never forgot an insult, remembered Magali's sarcasms that evening at the night-club, when he had sat in a box with the Baroness de Mauchamp. The idea of inflicting this first retribution upon her delighted him. For, he argued, however hard-boiled a woman may be, she doesn't like to be caught *flagrante delicto* by her own daughter in her son-in-law's love nest. In that direction, therefore, things were really moving well. Paolo, with diabolic cunning, had upset the *ménage à trois* at the *Petit Trianon*.

And this was only the first act of the drama!

Paolo put on his tall hat, and leaning on his crutches limped towards the waiting car. He called out to the chauffeur:

"Drive me to the Japanese Consulate."

Shanghai was in a state of feverish excitement. The cheap Chinese newspapers had printed in big characters the announcement of the attack on Hawaii. The English papers had WAR written in enormous headlines. Groups of people were gathered at the corners of the streets and along the Bund. In front of the Customs House stood a little crowd of Europeans, discussing the perils of their situation. The Japanese guard around the English Consulate-General had been reinforced. At the entrance to the Sou-Chow Creek Bridge, Paolo's car was held up by a Japanese officer, who, seeing him in his tall hat and black morning coat, with an enormous gardenia in his button-hole, took him for a diplomat, and allowed the car to go through.

Before long Paolo found himself in Mr. Kimura's office. The associate member of the Black Dragon was very busy, and the Consulate itself resembled a beehive on a stormy day. Nevertheless Mr. Kimura was quite willing to give his attention to his fellow conspirator.

"My dear Kimura," said Paolo, "the moment I learnt that a state of war existed between your great and noble country and the U.S.A., I came to offer my respects to the Consul-General."

"The Consul-General, I regret to say, is overburdened with work, but you may rest assured that the Honourable Mr. Azuma will be pleased to accept your good wishes."

A few minutes later, Paolo was ushered into Mr. Azuma's office. The Consul-General was of a very different build from Mr. Kimura, who always seemed to be floating in his suit, two sizes too big for his body. Mr. Azuma was tall, fat, and authoritative. His face resembled one of those impressionistic masks worn by actors in the Kabuki Theatre. His black eyes shone like jet stones under his bushy eyebrows, and his upstanding bristly black hair resembled a horse-hair wig. His boggy-man appearance would have had the worst possible effect upon any pregnant woman meeting him in a badly lighted corridor. Looking at him one was at once reminded of those old-fashioned dramas in the classic theatre *Nô*, or of the Kawatake tragedies which always end in 'Joshi,' the suicide pact between the hero and his beloved.

Paolo bowed low before him. The Japanese boggy-man returned his greeting. Paolo advanced a few steps, balanced himself on his crutches, and took from Mr. Kimura's hand a box which that gentleman had obligingly carried up for him. It was an oblong box wrapped up in cellophane, tied up with a piece of ribbon, coloured like the Italian national flag.

"Sir," began Paolo, "at this historic moment when His Majesty the Emperor Hirohito has declared war on England and the United States, pray allow your most humble and unworthy friend

to offer you his best wishes and to present you with this gift in token of his loyalty."

Mr. Azuma opened the package and found inside a black jewel-case containing the dagger which Paolo had worn in the days when he held an important post in the Grand Council of the Fascist Party. It was a very handsome dagger, with its grey mother-of-pearl hilt and its wonderful nielloed blade. Mr. Azuma, himself a native of Nara, and therefore a connoisseur in well-tempered steel, bowed again in appreciation of the gift, and having no time for further conversation with Paolo at the moment, invited him to dinner that very evening.

Paolo accepted with alacrity.



Dinner was served in Mr. Azuma's private room. It was an intimate little affair, the only other guests being Colonel Hideyo Nagano, Provost-Marshal to the Imperial armies of occupation, and Mr. Kimura. The *décor* of the room and the behaviour of the guests were strictly Japanese.

Crouching round the *tatami* with the rest of the company, Paolo was served by one of the four geishas whom Azuma had hired for the evening, as was the custom. They were four young ladies dressed in magnificent kimonos, the four most distinguished among the geisha emigrées to Shanghai, reserved for the use of high-ranking officers or of members of the *Corps Diplomatique*. The one whose duty it was to entertain Paolo at dinner was called Melle Troubled Heart. She was born in Kyoto, and spoke English fairly fluently. She related to Paolo how she had learnt the trade of geisha in the Shimabura quarter, where she had graduated as a *hangio*, or "half-pay," before eventually winning her spurs. She also told him that she had banished for ever the evil passion of jealousy from her heart, by making a pilgrimage to the Uji Bridge, on the road leading from Kyoto into the province of Yamato. Near this historic bridge stands the temple dedicated to the memory of the Princess Uji, who threw herself into the river in a fit of jealous rage. Since that day, the unhappy lady has been the patron saint of all jealous women in Japan.

When dessert was served, Mr. Azuma made a quick sign, and the geishas disappeared like four well-trained mice. The three Japanese drained their glasses of *saké*, toasting the victory of the Axis. It was an act of civility to Paolo, who for several years now had been serving them as an unofficial secret agent.

The conversation turned on to the subject of the war. Paolo complained bitterly about the behaviour of the Nazis in Lybia towards Mussolini's troops, while Colonel Nagano gave boastful details of the damage inflicted by the Japanese air-force at Pearl Harbour. Then Mr. Azuma, whose staring black eyes had a truly hypnotic effect upon his listeners, began to discuss the problem of the white people in Shanghai. Paolo questioned him as to the fate of the English and Americans who had been unable to leave Shanghai by the S.S. *Oregon*.

"Oh, we'll take good care of them, never fear," declared Mr. Azuma with the wide smile of a hungry carrion-crow. "We won't forget them, my dear Commendatore."

"And the French?"

"The French we'll leave alone. They're defeated, and they've given us Indo-China."

"And the Russians?"

"They're neutral. We've signed a non-aggression pact with them, which we shall hold to so long as it suits our interests."

"So you're going to leave the Russians alone?"

"Precisely."

Mr. Azuma and Mr. Kimura exchanged looks. They understood perfectly the true reason for Paolo's question. Mr. Kimura ventured gently:

"Would it be indiscreet to ask if it was your ex-business partner you had in mind?"

"It was."

Mr. Kimura and Mr. Azuma again exchanged looks. Mr. Azuma, who was stirring the live embers on the *hibashi* ash-heap, murmured:

"Unless Count Stolitzine should happen to meet with an . . . er . . . unfortunate accident, I do not see how we can molest him officially in any way."

There was a silence. Colonel Nagano struck a match on the sole of his boot. Mr. Kimura began peeling a mandarine. Paolo returned to the attack!

"Gentlemen, you cannot molest Boris Stolitzine officially. I appreciate that. But the worthy Colonel Nagano here will, I am sure, support me when I say that there is such a thing as an indirect shot, which is very frequently practised in artillery battles."

"That is so," replied the officer.

"For instance, one can aim at an enemy and injure him more seriously by striking his wife?"

Mr. Azuma, who took the hint at once, protested:

"My dear Commendatore, Countess Stolitzine is doubly pro-

tected, firstly because she is married to a neutral, and secondly because, as the Baron de Mauchamp's widow, she is French. Our ministry in Tokyo has decided that French citizens are to remain unmolested."

A smile of triumph crossed Paolo's face. He pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket-book, and said:

"If I were to prove to you that the Countess Stolitzine was not a French woman, what would you do?"

Mr. Azuma and Mr. Kimura appeared extremely interested at this remark. At heart they disliked Stolitzine for being a Russian and therefore a potential enemy.

"Gentlemen," continued Paolo, "according to information which has reached me from Saigon, it appears that Countess Stolitzine never was the Baroness de Mauchamp. She is the daughter of plain Benjamin and Magali Hobson. Her father was American, her mother became American by marriage. Their daughter Claudette was an American citizen and still holds an American passport. When she married Boris Stolitzine in the French Concession she did not become a Russian citizen; she remained a citizen of the U.S.A."

The three Nippons leaned over Paolo's shoulder to read the document. They nodded their heads, satisfied as to its authenticity.

"What do you think of it?" asked Paolo.

"If our own enquiries confirm these details, then Countess Stolitzine will come on the list of those people to whom we apply special treatment. The mother, born in France of French parentage, would not come under the same category; but if the daughter is, as you say, registered at the United States Consulate, there is no problem at all in her case." Mr. Azuma shot Paolo a quick smile, a smile calculated to freeze the blood in the veins of the toughest criminal. "Would you like us, dear Commendatore, to make a *very special* case of the Countess?"

"My dear Consul-General, I should be enchanted."

Mr. Kimura looked at his chief enquiringly:

"I think we ought not to find it difficult to gratify the Honourable Mr. Borgia's request?"

"Not at all difficult."

This little piece of dialogue caused Paolo's mouth to water. He asked:

"What does that imply exactly?"

Like a kindly old uncle allowing himself to be twitted about the nature of the present he has bought for his little nephew, the Consul-General giggled:

"Ha . . . ? Tsa . . . !"

Paolo turned to Kimura. The little skeleton smiled behind his blue-tinted spectacles: he imitated his superior:

"Hé . . . hé . . . Tsa . . . Tsa," he squeaked.

Those "Tsa Tsa's" sounded promising, but Paolo would have liked to know more. He turned beseeching eyes on Colonel Nagano. The Provost-Marshall, who had been concerned in the massacres in Nanking, and whose reputation as a torturer was well established between Tientsin and Kong-Chien-Chao, the Japanese Concession in the province of Che-Kiang, burst into loud, guffawing laughter. He also took a malicious pleasure in this guessing game.

"Huah . . . huah . . . Huah! Tsa . . . tsa . . . tsa!"

And with his enormous hands he thrummed out a self-satisfied tattoo on the brown leather belt of his uniform.



Three weeks had gone by. Claudette, cured of her illness, returned to the *Petit Trianon*. Boris and Magali had fetched her from the hospital. Pale, and still rather weak, she smiled wanly at Boris as he offered her a spray of white irises.

Boris tactfully made himself scarce, leaving mother and daughter alone together for the first time since Claudette's return to health. She lay full length on the sofa, saying nothing, avoiding her mother's glance. Magali, her heart heavy, loitered about the room. She put a coverlet over her daughter's feet. She unpacked her valise, and arranged the scents and creams upon the dressing-table. The silence became more and more oppressive. Magali kept trying to catch her daughter's eye, but Claudette looked fixedly away.

Very gently, as though hardly daring to raise her voice, Magali said:

"Darling, would you like me to get you a hot cup of tea?"

"No, thank you."

Magali continued her aimless wandering up and down the room, picking up objects and setting them down again. She put the irises into a vase.

Claudette lay beside the window, watching the clouds pass across the sky. Her tired hands were clasped over the thick grey eiderdown.

Magali made another attempt.

"Darling, will you have a cigarette?"

"No, thank you."

"How are you feeling?"

"Quite well at present."

"You don't know how thankful I was when Doctor Sarrazin told me the attack would have no subsequent ill-effects."

"No. No ill-effects."

Claudette still lay with her face turned towards the window. Her persistent refusal to respond to any advances was torture to Magali. There was another silence, a very long silence, a silence which was so unbearable to Magali that she suddenly threw herself upon Claudette, seized her in her arms and began to sob violently. Between her sobs she covered Claudette with kisses. Claudette lay there, dulled and passive. She said nothing. At last Magali moaned aloud:

"Have you forgiven me, darling one?"

Claudette still refused to answer.

"Say you've forgiven me, darling; say it, say it!"

Claudette sighed. Magali went on:

"You're torturing me! This silence is unbearable. Oh, forgive me, say you forgive me. I'll go down on my knees to you! Claudette, look! Your mother's on her knees before you. Try . . . try and forgive me!"

"Yes, Mother."

"Look me in the face."

"I can't yet."

"So you won't forgive me?"

"Yes, of course, of course I forgive you."

The lack-lustre note in Claudette's voice was worse than any angry outburst. For a hot-headed creature like Magali, who loved emotional scenes, and exaggerated everything, good or bad, this disarming indifference was intolerable. She started weeping again upon her daughter's hands.

Finally Claudette murmured:

"Something has been broken between us."

Magali started up violently, as though she had received an unexpected shock. She seized Claudette by the shoulders, dragging her towards her. Breathlessly she asked:

"What? What? . . . What did you say? Something broken between us? Oh no, no!"

"Yes, Mother."

Claudette leant back against the cushions. Still avoiding her mother's eyes, she began to talk. She talked in a low, sad monologue, like someone pronouncing a funeral lament over an affection slain.

"I can't forget . . . I can still see you there that evening . . . with my husband . . . Never has mother dealt her daughter such a frightful blow . . . Oh, it's not that I mind so much about Boris."

He'd already cured me of my illusions. . . . But your love for me, I believed in that . . . Yes, it was a sort of religion to me. I believed in you, Mother . . . Any deception on your part, that was a thing inconceivable to me . . . When I was a small child I trusted you. When I grew older, and my friends at the *lycée* told me little lies, I used to console myself by saying, 'Mother would never do that to me!' You were everything to me: my good fairy, my big sister, my companion, my accomplice. I couldn't conceive that anything could ever come between us—ever. Yet there it is . . . my idol has been shattered . . . and by you yourself."

"Claudette . . . Claudette!"

"I can't speak any differently. I can't pretend to forgive and forget, because I just *can't* forget. Oh, Mother, you were wrong to crush that lovely thing, our intimacy, the trust I had in you. You've taken away what was dearest to me in the world. Why did you do it?"

Claudette's voice, scarcely audible now, sank away into a sigh. Her sorrow, expressed in such low and measured tones, had a ring of finality about it. It was like the lowering of a corpse into a tomb, which was to be sealed for ever.

At the idea of losing her daughter's affection, Magali was seized with real terror. She clutched at Claudette's wrists with the frenzy of a person about to drown. She stammered incoherent words:

"What you say is killing me. . . . Claudette, child, have pity . . .! Even the worst criminals have the right of defence. What I've done is unspeakable, I know . . . I admit it in all sincerity. But my intentions were good."

"Pure!"

"Claudette!"

"You seduced my husband in order to keep his affections for me alive?"

"You can't condemn me like that without a hearing! Human motives are never entirely good nor entirely bad. What I'm going to say now may sound mad, ridiculous, illogical. It's your husband who's the guilty one. His attitude towards you made me feel desperate . . . I can still see you in this room, crying your eyes out because he'd been unfaithful, ashamed because he was making you look ridiculous. I shared in your unhappiness, so I . . . I . . ."

"So you encouraged him to return to me by seducing him yourself."

"I swear to you, I allowed myself to be carried away for your sake alone. I didn't know what else to do to get him back. I was helpless. . . ."

"If it was a pure sacrifice, made for my sake alone, then you

were certainly acting the part very well when I found you and Boris lying in each other's arms."

Magali buried her head in her hands. She spoke in a sudden chastened voice.

"I was in love with him."

"Before I married him?"

"Oh, no, never. That I swear to you!"

"I no longer know what to believe. Anything seems possible now."

"I fell in love with him by degrees. I couldn't help it. I fought against it."

"You fought up till the moment when an act of devotion to your daughter became a pleasure. Well, there's only one thing for you to do now. Keep Boris for yourself, I make you a present of him."

"You're mad!"

"But don't ask me to love you as I used to in the old days. No, that's all over now. . . . But let me say to you again, I have no regrets. Boris has a perfect right to prefer you to me . . . or to his Chinese mistresses . . . or to his adventuress friends. Continue your life with him. But never ask me to love and trust you as in the old days. That's all over."

"Claudette . . . no . . . no!"

"I don't ask you to chose between me and him. Boris means nothing to me now. If there wasn't this war ahead of us, coming to upset everything, I'd start divorce proceedings at once. And you, Mother, you're only the ghost of someone I once adored."

"If you stop loving me, I'll die!"

"No. Boris will comfort you."

"Never!"

"Mother, don't start heroics."

"You're causing me agony . . .!"

"No, no, don't be foolish. I'd rather you told me straight out when your secret affair first started . . . I mean, before it became a *fait accompli*. If you'd honestly spoken out and told me you were falling in love with Boris yourself, it would probably have made me unhappy . . . for a while. But I'd have loved you for your frankness. One can't always master one's feelings. I'd have understood, then . . . I'd have gone away by myself somewhere, and left you alone with Boris. You could have been openly happy with him. But when I think of you leading that double life, smiling at me while all the time you were deceiving me, kissing me as you came out of that horrible apartment! . . . No!"

Magali wiped her swollen eyes. Claudette had stopped talking.

Once more she turned her face towards the window, gazing wearily at the grey heavens.

How sad Shanghai looked that day. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. Boris was working in his office. The boys were waiting patiently in the dining-room for the two ladies to appear.

The Manchurian butler knocked on the door. This sudden intrusion from the outside world made mother and daughter jump. He came in:

"Missi Hobson . . . There's a Japanese officer downstairs . . . he's called to see the Countess."

Magali quickly rose to her feet.

"What does he want?"

"I don't know . . . He's waiting in the hall with his soldiers . . . He said . . . very urgent."

Magali wanted to parley with the officer alone. But Claudette got up, prepared to face him in person. Leaning over the staircase, the two women saw, in fact, two soldiers guarding the front door with fixed bayonets. A little peak-capped officer, who spoke English fairly fluently, advanced towards them.

"Which of you is Countess Stolitzine?"

"I am," said Claudette.

"Show me your passport."

Magali interrupted him.

"What are you doing in the French Concession?"

"Excuse me, Madame, but who are you?"

"I am her mother. What do you want of her?"

"Passport."

"Why on earth?"

"Her passport, quick!"

Magali, quick as ever in her reactions, had a sudden inspiration. She ran hurriedly upstairs, and returned with a false French passport, the one which bore the name of the Baroness de Mauchamp. The Japanese officer deciphered the name, looked at the brown cover inscribed with the initials of the French Republic, and with the sneer of a man who has been told what to expect and how to act, handed the passport back to Magali. Magali counter-attacked:

"You see . . . look here . . . Madame is French! You have therefore no right . . ."

"I want the real passport . . . the American."

"Captain, I regret . . . Madame is a French woman."

"No . . . Give me the real passport, lest more serious consequences should ensue."

Magali obstinately stood her ground. The officer, growing

impatient, summoned his two men, and gave them a sharp order in Japanese. Turning to Claudette, he said:

"You're under arrest. Follow us."

Magali spoke out vehemently:

"You've got no right to arrest my daughter. She's married to a Russian, Count Stolitzine. I shall inform him at once."

"That would be useless. We're acting under orders from the General in Command of the army of occupation."

Claudette made a sign to her mother that it was useless to protest. She asked permission to go and fetch a fur coat. The officer said:

"Hurry up!"

Claudette went upstairs to her room, while Magali rushed into the library to telephone Boris. Claudette came down in her fur coat, and was bundled without further ado into a military lorry. The officer clicked the door to behind her.

Meanwhile Magali, in a state of great agitation, was explaining the incident to Boris over the telephone. Boris promised to get the matter cleared up at once, and tried to reassure Magali down the line. It was an obvious case of excess of zeal on the part of a junior officer.



Boris got quickly into his car and drove to the Japanese Consulate. Claudette's arrest had not come as such a shock to him as it had to Magali. He remembered Mr. Kimura's visit. The latter had made it quite clear that he should have allowed himself to be killed in the duel with Borgia. Now he was revenging himself on Claudette.

Boris drew up the car at the corner of the Nanking Road to buy a copy of the afternoon edition of the *Shanghai Sun*, a paper printed in English and financed by Wang Ching Wei's collaborationist government. He took a quick glance at the stop press news. Suddenly his attention was drawn to an article on the second page headed:

A MASTERLY HOAX

All Shanghai inhabitants who would care to relax for a moment and put to-day's crisis out of their minds, will have good occasion to laugh this evening over their dinner-tables.

The hoax concerns a certain well-known Russian aristocrat.

It appears that this breaker of hearts, who had imagined he was marrying the young and pretty widow—and, darlings, a Baroness to boot!—of a French colonial Governor, has recently discovered, to his extreme mortification, that he has been well and truly had!

And by whom, do you think! Darlings, just imagine! . . . By the ex-Captain of the *taxi-girls* at one of our most fashionable night-clubs.

It is now a well-established fact that this Slav nobleman, with his Don Juan ways, has gone and married this scheming woman's very own daughter. The fascinating French Baroness was, in fact, a mere little bourgeoisie American, ennobled only in her mother's imagination.

Once upon a time the famous La Fontaine wrote: "Shamed like a fox caught in a hen's toils."

Our handsome Russian fox must now be remembering the old saying about love blindfolding the cleverest eyes.

Boris in his exasperation, tore the paper into shreds. That little gossip column article was both offensive to his wife, and degrading to his own self-esteem. To-night all Shanghai would know the truth. Boris's pride was very hurt. His reputation as a man of the world, that reputation he so dearly cherished, would receive a nasty blow.

He pondered over the origin of this piece of malice. Without knowing just how much to attribute to Paolo, he suspected that he was in some way mixed up in it. Boris had never seen him since the day of their duel. Their partnership was broken up. The lawyer had liquidated Paolo's share in the business. But Boris, knowing Paolo's character so well, suspected that some sort of revenge was inevitable.

There was only one thing which puzzled him: How did his former comrade-in-arms know the story of Magali's plottings down to the smallest detail?

He was suddenly seized with an intense hatred for this venomous cripple. One could expect any low-down trick from him now. The more misery he caused, the better he would be pleased. And Boris realized he was powerless to retaliate. What could he do against a mutilated man? Nothing, except strangle him like a noxious beast.

Boris stopped the car at the door of the Japanese Consulate. After having kept him waiting in the hall for three-quarters of an hour, the office boy informed him:

"So sorry . . . Mr. Kimura is in conference."

Boris chafed under this restraint. He realized now that the tables were turned. Last time it was Mr. Kimura who had come to the *Petit Trianon* to ask a favour of him. Boris had been rude. To-day it was he who had to eat humble pie. Mr. Kimura was paying him back in his own coin.

Having waited an hour and a half, Boris got up and enquired sharply:

"Is this farce going on for ever? Give me the telephone. I'll speak to Mr. Kimura myself."

The office-boy hesitated. Suddenly one of the doors leading into the hall opened, and Mr. Kimura appeared in person. He was smiling blandly behind his blue spectacles, and bowed, his hands folded in a gesture of exquisite politeness.

"Count Stolitzine . . ." he said. "I am so sorry, so very sorry! Please come in, and, once again, a thousand pardons."

Boris strode angrily into the office, followed by little Mr. Kimura, who more than ever before appeared to float, this time in a widely-cut black silk coat, and a collar far too big for his tiny wizened neck.

XXIII

BORIS wasted no time in useless formalities. He went straight to the point:

"Mr. Kimura. I've come to lodge a formal protest against the abuse of authority which your officials have committed. Why did they arrest my wife this afternoon?"

"Oh . . .!"

Mr. Kimura's "Oh" expressed such surprise and horror that one would have imagined he was ignorant of the whole affair.

"You are perfectly aware of what has happened, Mr. Kimura. As a Russian citizen, I rank as a neutral, and therefore demand my wife's immediate release."

Perfect actor that he was, Mr. Kimura raised his arms skywards. He looked like a man who had been accused of some flagrant misdemeanour; like a punctual, conscientious little office clerk, who would be horrified at the idea of even squashing a fly.

"Countess Stolitzine? Arrested? And by whom?"

"Come on . . . no play-acting, Mr. Kimura. This is a serious matter."

"If she has been provisionally detained, it is no doubt the high military command which has found it necessary."

"No matter who did it. If the Consul-General does not get my wife released before seven o'clock this evening, I shall take measures."

Mr. Kimura acted himself more and more into the rôle of worried underling. He murmured:

"Count Stolitzine! You won't create a diplomatic 'incident!'"

"Yes."

"Oh . . .!"

Boris began to get irritated with Mr. Kimura's reiterated exclamations of woe. He cried out:

"I wish to speak to the Consul-General."

"A moment, please."

Mr. Kimura lifted the receiver and began talking in Japanese. It sounded like the rattle of a machine-gun. First he let loose a string of words ending in A, then another string of words ending in O, finishing finally with the word 'Sodeska,' followed by another word 'Annonei.' Then he rose to his feet, smiling more graciously than before:

"Count Stolitzine, the Consul-General will receive you."

Boris followed Mr. Kimura into Mr. Azuma's vast office. The man with the face like a grimacing mask and eyes like two boot-buttons pinned into a lemon, rose to his feet. He motioned Boris to a chair. Boris repeated his demand. Mr. Azuma, looking at Boris with his impassive, bogy-man face, heard his story to the end. He then took up the thread, speaking slowly and carefully.

"Count Stolitzine, before discussing the question of Countess Stolitzine's arrest, let me remind you that you have no right to ask any favour from me. If ever the firm of Stolitzine and Borgia has done us any service in China, it is to your partner we are indebted, not to you. He alone has given proof of his loyalty to the standard of the Rising Sun. I regret that we recognize no obligation either to yourself or to your *entourage*."

"Mr. Azuma, I shall be content with the exercise of my own rights in the matter. I am Russian, and therefore a neutral. My wife has assumed her husband's nationality."

The boot-buttons in Mr. Azuma's mask-like face glittered fiercely.

"What is there to protect you in Shanghai, Count Stolitzine? The U.S.S.R. flag?"

"Naturally. I am a Russian."

"And your wife is an American; we have made that discovery from the Press."

Mr. Azuma reached among the papers on his desk for the latest edition of the *Shanghai Sun*. He showed Boris the item in the social gossip column.

"You see? The Chinese papers themselves have got hold of this intriguing piece of gossip, and are publishing it abroad. Moreover, we have made our own enquiries in Saïgon, which, as

you know, now belongs to us. The Baroness de Mauchamp is the mythical creation of an adventuress, whose moral conduct is clearly more your concern than ours. Countess Stolitzine, holding an American passport, comes therefore into the category of civilians whom it is our government's intention to intern. We cannot make an exception in your case . . . That is . . . unless of course . . ."

Boris saw a ray of hope. He repeated:

"Unless?"

"Unless your former partner, Mr. Paolo Borgia, should make a special pleading of your case. Would you care to telephone him?"

Boris shrugged his shoulders. How he hated playing the rôle of mouse to someone else's cat! He tried to bluff it out:

"Very well then! Let's admit my wife is American by birth. Nevertheless she became Russian when she married me."

"No! An American retains her nationality when she marries a foreigner."

"That's not the point . . . The very fact that I'm married to her puts her automatically under the protection of the U.S.S.R. Consulate."

Mr. Azuma's thick black eyebrows grew round like organ stops.

"Are you trying to tell me that the emblem of the Hammer and Sickle is included in the coat-of-arms of the noble family of Stolitzine? When we find the Bolsheviks running to the Countess Stolitzine's assistance, we shall refer the matter to Tokyo. But not before."

Boris rose to his feet and threw out his challenge.

"You may expect an immediate communication from the Consulate-General of the U.S.S.R."

"We shall await it with curiosity, Count Stolitzine."

Mr. Azuma accentuated the 'Count.' Boris bowed and went out.

Alone together, the two Japanese exchanged a smile of satisfaction. A white man, and a Russian into the bargain, had lost face before them. The unfortunate man had tried to bluff it out, but it had been a poor, feeble attempt. The last snarl of an old toothless wolf.

Mr. Azuma's secretary came in with a message that Colonel Hideyo Nagano had called. The two diplomats bowed low before the Provost-Marshal. Among his duties was the very task of dealing with enemy aliens.

Mr. Azuma described his talk with Count Stolitzine.

"I'm sure our friend Mr. Paolo Borgia would have relished your little conversation. His ex-partner's wife under lock and key, and the husband kicking his heels in the waiting-room, come to beg for her release! A nice revenge for the cripple! And now we're

on the subject of this curious affair, tell me please, what is she like, this Baroness who's not really a Baroness, this French woman who's an American, this Countess who's not a Russian?"

"Would you care to see her portrait, Colonel?"

"Show it me, please."

Mr. Kimura pulled out of a file of papers a photograph of Claudette, taken on the eve of her marriage. Colonel Nagano made a sucking noise with his lips. He was a great pot-bellied individual with a sweaty face, round shoulders like the sides of a barrel, and enormous wrestler's hands. As was his habit when excited he began beating a tattoo on the brown leather belt of his uniform:

"Oh! Pretty! Pretty!" he said.

"I agree," said Mr. Azuma. "Certainly for those who like that European type."

"What age?"

"Wait a moment. . . . It's written on the card. . . . Twenty."

"Tsa . . . Tsa . . ."

The Colonel's 'Tsa Tsas' sounded like the sharp snarls of a hungry caged beast waiting for the keeper with his basket of raw meat.

He gazed in deep contemplation at Claudette's portrait, then, casting a sly look in Mr. Azuma's direction, he observed:

"Did you not mention to Mr. Paolo Borgia that we would make a special case of his ex-partner's wife?"

"That is so."

"You did not realize how well you spoke. I intend to keep her under my personal supervision."

"Where?"

"At the Bridge House."

For the first time after so many years in Shanghai, in the course of which he had piled success upon success, both in the field of love and of high finance, Boris felt himself crushed.

His power in Shanghai in those carefree days of peace, his reputation as uncrowned king of the international city had crumbled to dust before the Japanese war machine.

Directly he left the Consulate, he realized that he had humiliated himself unnecessarily by going to call on Mr. Azuma. Boris knew well enough that the U.S.S.R. Consul would not lift a finger to help Countess Stolitine. The fate of an exiled white Russian's wife would not disturb the conscience of the Soviet authorities.

In his perplexity he contemplated applying to the French Consul. Perhaps the representative of the Vichy Government would have sufficient influence; after all, the unhappy conquered land of France had ceded Indo-China to Japan. Japan might well return thanks by liberating Claudette. Then, on second thoughts, Boris realized that the French Consul would not be very interested in rescuing a half-French woman who had preferred to keep her American citizenship, and who was married, moreover, to a Russian. Now that the Vichy Government had levied troops to fight for the Germans on the Russian front, it would be paradoxical for the French Consul to take an interest in the welfare of Countess Stolitzine.

Boris thought and thought again, and the idea of applying to the Russian Consul again recurred to his mind. He had never had any dealings with the Soviet representatives. He hated them for having shot his relations and driven him into exile. But in his present state of distress he could forget his twenty-five-year-old resentments—they no longer counted now.

He drove to the Russian Consulate and asked the clerk to present his card to Mr. Wladimir Souvarine. In a few minutes he was shown into his office. The Consul-General rose to greet him; behind his head hung a large photograph of Stalin. Mr. Souvarine was tall, thin and blond. His clear, blue eyes, his fresh complexion, close-cropped hair and short moustache were more typical of an Anglo-Saxon diplomat than of a Russian. He looked his caller straight in the eyes, concealing any surprise he might feel at finding himself face to face with an aristocrat. Then, pretending to be ignorant of the fact that there existed such a person as Boris in Shanghai, he looked enquiringly at the visiting-card:

"Count Boris Stolitzine?"

"Yes, Consul-General . . . But it's no *ci-devant* aristocrat who has called this evening to see you. It's Shylock."

Mr. Souvarine raised his eyebrows. Boris explained:

"Shylock has come to demand his pound of flesh."

A vague smile of astonishment passed across Mr. Souvarine's features. His interest was aroused. He offered Boris a seat:

"Count Stolitzine, I'm at your service."

"My dear Consul-General," said Boris, "though I know it is your duty not to recognize me officially, I take the liberty to suppose that my name means something to you. Quite simply because you are as well-acquainted as I am with Russian history. In 1918, the Revolutionaries put my father Alexis Constantino-vitch to death in the Peter and Paul fortress, and in 1919 assassinated my mother, Olga Feodorovna, near Kiev. They took from me

two people whom I dearly loved. To-day I'm asking you to restore to me one person whom I dearly love—my wife."

Boris's astonishing preamble had quite disconcerted Mr. Souvarine. He remained speechless for a few minutes, and then offered Boris a cigarette. Boris continued:

"Now perhaps you understand my allusion to the Shakespearean character."

"What has happened to Countess Stolitzine?"

"She was arrested by the Japs this afternoon."

"She's an American, is she not?"

"Yes."

"In which case they've interned her in Bridge House with the other British and American nationals."

"I suppose so."

"And your request?"

"That you should make an official protest to the Japanese authorities."

"To get her released? You expect me to make an official protest in the interests of Countess Stolitzine?"

"Consul-General, I'm asking a very humble compensation from your government. When you killed my father and mother, you were opening a long-dated account. I'm ready to close it again this evening, if you will come to my assistance in saving the life of a woman dear to me, who bears my name."

"You realize that revolutions ignore undertakings subscribed to by the régimes they have overthrown. The *petite bourgeoisie* of France entrusted millions of gold francs to the Tzarist government. They tried to make us redeem that debt. We sent them to the devil."

"Naturally, Mr. Souvarine. . . . That was much more serious. It was a question of money, and money counts more than human life. Revolutions are in a sense like Harpagon's daughter. They are stingy with the money that they have extorted from their predecessors. But now we're discussing something much less important than a bank-note—a mere human life. For you know as well as I do, that your régime, founded on the slaughter of a million and a half Russians, values a million no more than a dishonoured cheque."

"Logically speaking, your proposition holds good. But logic to the statesman is like strychnine to the heart-case. He's afraid of taking too much. Boris Alexandrovitch, I have no feeling of personal animosity towards you. You're the descendant of a long line of aristocrats, the first of whom stole his coronet from under an Empress's nightgown . . . everyone has his own idea of pride of class. We considered that you and your kind had enjoyed

your centuries-old privileges long enough. You'd had your *série gagnante* on History's roulette board; the *série rouge* was bound to come up sooner or later. You were not robbed of everything . . ."

"A father . . . a mother . . ."

"Forgive me for reminding you that twenty years earlier it was you and your kind who were shooting my comrades on the Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg. We're quits."

Boris, who did not like the turn the conversation was taking, asked:

"Well, then?"

"Well, then, seeing that we're quits, let me offer you an arm-chair and a cigarette."

"Have I erred in coming to ask your help to save my wife?"

"No. You have not erred. Because all white Russians like yourself came knocking at the door of this Consulate the moment Hitler started hammering at the gates of Moscow. Like you, they nourished bitter hates. But Russia's martyrdom made them forget their personal grievances. They understood that we were all together in the struggle against Germany, that to-morrow it might be Japan as well. They understood that fellow-enemies, in face of a common danger, have only one duty and that is to unite. And for that reason I intend to intervene with the Japanese authorities in the interests of your wife."

Boris, utterly amazed, stammered:

"I shall be profoundly grateful to you!"

"I don't know whether I shall succeed. Legally my position is insecure . . . But I'll do my best."

Boris got up. As they reached the door, he instinctively made a gesture as though to grip Souvarine by the hand, in an access of gratitude. Then he let it fall. Souvarine guessed what was in his mind. He said gently:

"It's too early yet for us to shake hands . . . On mine, as on yours, there are still traces of blood."



Boris felt eased by his conversation with Souvarine. He left the Consulate with renewed hope. But he must act quickly. The position of the whites in Shanghai was growing hourly worse. Before returning to the *Petit Trianon*, he called on the chief editor of the *Shanghai Daily News*. Here he was told the latest developments: the sailors of the British gunboat *Petrel* had sunk their ship in the Wang Poo. The American gunboat *Wake* had

been captured by the Japanese. The English and American banks were closed, and would henceforth be under the administration of the gentlemen from Tokyo. The stern, pitiless law of the conqueror was now to make itself felt throughout the Concessions.

It was six o'clock when Boris finally knocked on Magali's sitting-room door. She was waiting for him, her eyes swollen from having cried so much. She said quickly:

"Well? Did you get anything out of them?"

"No. Azuma seized the opportunity to make me look a fool. But I don't think he'll have the last word. I failed with the Japanese, but had better luck with the Russians."

"What! You dared to go *there*?"

"Yes. And Mr. Souvarine promised to intervene."

Boris related his conversation with the Soviet Representative. If there was anyone in Shanghai who could get Claudette released, it was he. Magali, slightly relieved by this news, suggested:

"In that case we must go at once to the Bridge House. We'll take some food for Claudette and make her as comfortable as possible till she's released."

Boris agreed. They set off at once with parcels and blankets. They drove past the General Post Office, crossed the Sechouen Road Bridge, and were stopped by a sentry fifty yards in front of the Bridge House. Boris parleyed with him in the darkness of the night. Finally a young officer appeared. When he was told that the man and woman had come to visit one of the internees, he cried out:

"Impossible . . . Forbidden."

Boris had made certain enquiries beforehand, among them the name of the Captain of the Guard. He said:

"I wish to speak to Captain Masao Sinju." The young officer hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Very well. You may come to his office, but you must leave the car behind."

Boris and Magali gathered up the parcels and blankets and trudged along in the darkness through thick mud, until they came to a door over which was written: "IMPERIAL POLICE." The Bridge House was a building containing several furnished apartments. It had been requisitioned and turned into a home for internees. The Japs had had several huts erected for that purpose in the courtyard.

A great deal of further parleying ensued before Boris and Magali were finally ushered into Captain Sinju's office. It was a large square room; warders kept coming in and out in an almost incessant stream. Boris explained to the Captain what he wanted, but the Captain did not appear to be listening.

"Wait a moment," he said.

There was no chair in the room, so Boris and Magali remained standing. The Captain left the room without a word and returned ten minutes later, arguing with a Japanese dressed in civilian clothes, an inspector in the secret police of the army of occupation. He suddenly remembered his two visitors, and asked in English:

"What were you saying? A woman called Claudette Stolitine?"

"Yes. She was arrested this afternoon."

He looked through the papers on his desk, which were scribbled all over in kana and Chinese characters:

"Yes. She's interned here. What do you want?"

"Is it possible to see her for a moment, just to give her these parcels?"

Captain Sinju and the inspector exploded with laughter, as though they had just heard the world's wittiest joke. The officer asked:

"Who might you be, in the first place?"

"I'm her husband."

The Captain translated the word 'husband' very coarsely into Japanese, causing the detective to burst into a fresh fit of laughter. He, in his turn, pointed to Magali, and asked:

"And that? Who's that?"

"Her mother . . ."

"Have you brought a whole delegation to see the prisoner?"

The Captain put an end to these witticisms. He barked out:

"It is strictly forbidden to communicate in any way with civilian internees."

Magali besought him:

"Captain, would you at least have the kindness to see that she gets these parcels?"

The detective, his interest aroused, came up close:

"What do the parcels contain?"

"This parcel contains sandwiches . . . this one sugar . . . this one tea . . . this toilet articles . . . this . . ."

"Open them."

Boris and Magali obeyed. When the whole lot were spread out on the office table, Captain Sinju called to some sentries who were warming themselves by the fire in the next room. He stood them all to attention in front of the desk, and threw one article to each man in turn, with a coarse epithet applied to each. Finally he took Claudette's toothbrush, spat on it, and started offensively polishing his boot with it. Boris sprang angrily forward, but the Japanese silenced him:

"We feed our prisoners ourselves, thank you. Your offer is an insult to the Imperial Army. Go away!"

The inspector went one better:

"When we intern a married woman," he said, "we don't require the husband to come prowling around outside her cell."

Another sharp order in Japanese brought in two guards, who, with fixed bayonets, pushed Boris and Magali towards the door.

All the other soldiers in the room who witnessed the expulsion of the two whites, let out great howls of derisive laughter. The Honourable Captain Sinju knew how to deal with these European swine.

XXIV

CLAUDETTE was huddled in the corner of a little room which had formerly been used as a lumber-room in one of the Bridge House apartments. The narrow window was netted up with barbed wire. Opposite Claudette another woman lay dozing, stretched out at full length on the ground. She was a blonde, pale Russian and wore a black dress. In the other corner sat a young Chinese woman with a pretty round face, a thick fringe of black hair and half-closed eyes, which seemed to be lost in contemplation of the Beyond. Her dark blue dress was torn to shreds, and bore witness to the struggle she had put up before allowing herself to be arrested. She had a graceful name which seemed to cast defiance at the dark sky and the rainstorms which beat against the window. She was called Melle Bright Day.

Claudette's hair was in disorder, her face pale without its make-up, and she had dark rings around her eyes. She had not undressed for ten days. A sense of decency in front of these two strangers had prevented it—moreover, the Japanese guards had a way of coming into the room without announcing themselves. That afternoon she was sitting in silence, waiting for the miracle to happen, that she should get news of her mother or of her husband. But the Japanese police forbade all communications with the outside world. Once every hour, the sentry, who was posted outside in the corridor, would cast inquisitive glances through a peep-hole which had been sawn through the panel of the door. His eyes took in each of the occupants in turn, like an ogre sampling a delicious meal.

Claudette had spent the first day of her imprisonment listening to the woes of the Russian woman, who spoke perfect French and appeared to accept her fate with resignation. She was, in fact, a dope-fiend, and had succeeded in smuggling some of her precious 'snow' into her powder-case. Instead of wielding the puff to powder her face, she would mechanically take a pinch of 'snow' in her fingers and snuff it up her nose. At once she would become talkative, and gossip away for hours on end in a low undertone.

"My dear," she said to Claudette, "now that I've got my drug with me, I don't care a damn about being under lock and key. Here or anywhere, it's all the same to me. D'you imagine I want to go back to a world where people who are supposed to be civilized start bashing each other about from the Equator to the North Pole? No, thank you. . . . Like a pinch? . . . Just to pass the time? . . . No? . . . Oh well, so much the better; my supply will last out all the longer. When it's used up I shall do away with myself. How, I don't quite know yet. But I prefer suicide to a life without coco . . . Those brutes! I wonder why they arrested me. Me, I'm a Russian. And you? Oh yes, you're American—you told me so already. So you're at war with them. Hm, that's rather a bad look-out for you. They've got a savage hatred of Yanks. The Russians they'll deal with later. But that doesn't prevent them hating us as well. We're all whites, the accursed race. Now I come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself . . . Natasha Krilenko. I'm thirty-five years old, my dear. Twenty of my years were spent in France and fifteen in China . . . Marseilles, Tientsin, Kharbin, Hang-chow and Shanghai. . . ."

Natasha stopped her flow of conversation and took a deep breath. She sighed, her fists clenched:

"Ah, it's good to feel that up one's nose. God, how it cheers one! It makes one forget everything, this cell, the sentry, that Chinese girl in the corner who gives me the willies . . . Oh, you needn't worry . . . she doesn't understand French . . . it even carries me away from this stinking atmosphere . . . the latrines smell like the perfumes of Araby . . . and remember, darling, we're incredibly lucky in a way. We're three women together. In the huts down below they're mixed. In one of them they've put thirty-five men and four women, with one piece of soap between the lot. They're treating us like a lot of animals. It must be hard for a woman of your class! Married to a Stolitzine? Yes, I remember now . . . If your husband's influence can't get you out of here, you'll just have to get resigned—become philosophical like me. If you don't, you're going to suffer." Natasha lowered her voice still more. "Look, there's that monkey-man looking at us again through the peep-hole. God, I'll bet he's already fixed on one of

us. No matter. Once I've got the 'snow' in my nose, the whole Japanese army could get aboard me—and would I care!"

This first conversation with Natasha had struck Claudette with dismay. The future loomed before her in the darkest possible light, and misery threatened to overwhelm her.

The next morning, bowls of rice were brought to them and cups of dirty water which was called tea. Natasha, after her sleepless nights, talked and talked away like a windmill in a high gale; she told Claudette the life-story of the silent Chinese girl crouching in the far corner:

"I know her by reputation. Melle Bright Day was the mistress of a Chinese General who joined up with the revolutionary forces in Chung-king. She had an apartment in a side street which runs off the Avenue Edouard VII, on the border of the International Concession. She had an *amah* who looked after her as though she were her daughter, and savings which she husbanded like a good housewife. But the fact that she was this enemy general's mistress made her suspect in the eyes of the Nippons. I tremble to think what her ultimate fate will be."

The days dragged slowly by. One afternoon, at the end of the second week, a police officer suddenly entered the cell. Claudette rushed up to him, demanding to be allowed to see the Captain of the Guard. The officer answered her with an equivocal smile:

"We haven't forgotten you . . . You're to be examined, not by Captain Sinju, but by the officer commanding the Imperial Police Force himself, the very moment he arrives back from Tokyo."

Claudette felt certain that this turn of events must be due to Boris's intervention, and it restored her peace of mind. That night, for the first time since her imprisonment, she fell into a deep and restful sleep, her fur coat wrapped tightly round her.

She was suddenly wakened by Natasha, who was lying snuggled up close beside her:

"Don't move," she said. "Lie quite still and don't look. There's something not very pretty happening over in the far corner of the room."

Ignoring Natasha's advice, Claudette half-opened her eyes, which, gradually becoming accustomed to the darkness, perceived three soldiers grouped around the Chinese woman. She thought at first that they were male nurses come to attend to her. All of a sudden, to her horror, she realized what was afoot. Two of the soldiers were holding her flat down on the floor while the third was violating her. She saw each officer in turn work his will on the unfortunate creature, who fought a grim struggle against them but without success. The spectacle was made all the more

fearsome by the fact that it was played out in complete silence. It was like a dumbshow acted by mutes. Suddenly there appeared a fourth soldier's face in the peep-hole over the door. He uttered a sharp warning in Japanese, no doubt apprising the men that their little game had gone on long enough. The three Nippons got up and walked out of the cell in silence. The bolt creaked back into its place. Everything was once more in order.

Claudette, her forehead damp with sweat, hearing the Chinese woman moaning to herself in the corner, fell on to her side and was violently sick.

Natasha caressed her gently, mechanically, on the cheek, crooning in the low sing-song voice of a drug-fiend who has lost an exact comprehension of the outside world:

"Poor little thing, poor little thing. Love's joys last but an hour; love's joys last but an hour . . ."

Claudette, like a frightened child, clasped her round the neck, and burst into a violent fit of sobbing.



Claudette lived on from day to day in expectation of her interview with the Colonel-in-Chief of the Imperial Police Force. She was convinced that it would lead to some alleviation of her sufferings, perhaps even to her release.

Every night the same ceremony was repeated in semi-darkness. Natasha, drugged, oblivious and unconcerned, drifted off into her artificial paradise. Claudette lay witnessing the nightly visits of the soldiers, who raped Melle Bright Day turn and turn about.

This performance used to occur in the other corner of the room, only a few feet away from Claudette. The wretched Chinese was becoming a "beast of pleasure" for all the prison-guard.

One Monday afternoon, just as the Russian woman was gazing in terror at the rapidly diminishing supply of cocaine in her powder-case, the Japanese plain-clothes detective entered the cell.

"Hey, you," said he, beckoning to Claudette; "come along with me. The Colonel wants to see you."

Claudette scrambled eagerly to her feet. Natasha squeezed her hand, murmuring:

"Your friends have succeeded . . . Good luck, douschka."

The policeman led Claudette along the passage, and brought her into an office on the ground-floor. She waited a few minutes. Suddenly an inner door was opened, and Colonel Hideyo Nagano entered. He sat down opposite Claudette and began to talk to her in a sort of composite jargon of French and pidgin English, the

whole seasoned with an occasional word of German. He was enormous in bulk, like a wrestler in uniform, his hair clipped short, thick rolls of fat around his neck, heavy slanting eyebrows and a dirty, jaundiced complexion. His hands were so powerful they frightened one, and his thumbs were spatulous like ducks' beaks.

For a few seconds he observed the prisoner with evident satisfaction, comparing her mentally with the photograph shown him by Mr. Azuma. He beamed contentedly.

"Countess . . . So soory de cet internment most regrettable. . . ."

Claudette broke in excitedly. This arrest was unwarranted. She was married to a Russian and therefore neutral. Her mother was French. They could have nothing against her. She didn't meddle in politics. Colonel Nagano sat listening to her appeal, a beatific smile upon his face, patting his waistbelt with those great paddles which he called his hands. He was enjoying himself playing the part of a great big benevolent soldier man:

"Yes, yes. Very displeasing internment. *Aber, les ordres de Tokyo, you see! . . . Tsa . . . Tsa. Aber savez . . . ?* One can accommodate the circumstances. The intervention Consulate *sovietique . . . très long . . .* must be investigated in Tokyo, is it not? . . . Very long! . . . *Aber . . . Your imprisonment rest avec you, yes? . . . Ja wohl . . . Can do! . . . Can do! . . . So simple! . . .*"

Claudette cried out:

"My husband is rich. I'm sure he'll subscribe largely to the Japanese Red Cross if . . ."

The Colonel burst out laughing. Money for the Red Cross, that's good, he thought. The bold way in which he kept looking Claudette up and down interpreted his inner thoughts. He said jokingly:

"Your husband? Pfff! Husbands good for chop-chop . . . Decapitate . . . That's all. But you not catching my meaning . . . look see . . . The Chinese girl in your cell . . . she does *couche couche* with . . . Listen, night-times, when you not sleepee . . . Five or four soldiers *couche couche avec. . .*" And to make quite sure that his captive understood his meaning, the Colonel with those fat hands of his made a gesture of the most appalling obscenity. Then, in that wheedling, coaxing tone which contrasted so strangely with his swollen yellow face, he went on: "When the guards have all *couche couche avec*, then it's the Russian Girl. . . . *Comme ca. . .* After that, *natiirlich, c'est vous. . .* No good, hey? *Aber*, my proposition much more pretty. . . . Look see Countess . . . So simple. . . . *Moi couche couche avec. . . Alors*, you are liberationated. . . . You say . . . 'no can do' . . . In that case, we, perfect gentlemen, say: 'Okay . . . You recevez fifty soldiers to *couche*

couche avec' . . . Les diplomats talky the same thing in gentleman's agreement . . . *Aber*, you *very jolie femme*. . . Great pity *couche couche avec fifty hommes*, when you possibility *coucher* with one only. You must decision to-night."

The Colonel rose to his feet and came up close to his victim. He prodded her neck, and allowed his spatulous fingers to creep across her breasts. Claudette sprang back in horror. The Colonel let out a genial guffaw:

"Tsal! . . . Tsal! . . . Tsal! . . . Not too responsive, Countess? You prefer fifty peasants to one gentleman? *Aber komisch!* . . . Perhaps you accept *ce soir* to say 'Can do!'" He added point to his ultimatum by an expressive gesture: "One gentleman . . . one" and he pointed his thumb upwards "Instead of fifty . . ." and he spread his ten fingers out fanwise five times in succession. "*Comprenez?* . . . One or fifty . . . *Un ou cinquante . . .*"

Claudette had backed towards the door. She cried out:

"Make them take me back to my cell!"

The Colonel barked out an order in Japanese, and the detective popped up like a jack in the box. He clicked his heels together, bowed to the Colonel, and led Claudette away. Two minutes later, the door of the cell had once more closed behind her.



At about six o'clock in the evening, when twilight began to darken the cell, Natasha's voice broke the long silence. The three prisoners had not opened their mouths since midday. Melle Bright Day, gloomier than ever, lay awaiting her night of martyrdom. Claudette, overcome by her interview with the Colonel, was haunted by his obscene gestures, and by his '*Un ou cinquante*, one or fifty.'

The fear of what that evening held in store kept her immobilized in her corner.

She was no longer crying, she was gazing fixedly ahead, seeing nothing.

Natasha's cry rang out like the tinkle of broken glass.

"Oh God . . . ! It's my last pinch this evening. What's to become of me? . . . Ho . . . Ha!"

She sidled up to Claudette, seized her by the wrists, and shook her violently.

"Douschka . . . I'm frightened . . . I can't live without sniffing . . . Last year I had to do without it for ten days . . . I thought I was going mad . . . It was torture . . ."

Claudette, exasperated by her wails, pushed her away.

"Oh, be quiet will you; stop that idiotic moaning. As if a drug mattered when we're perhaps going to suffer the same fate as that Chinese girl."

Natasha once again seized Claudette's wrists.

"Men! Bah! What do I care about men. They're just nothing. I want my 'snow.' If they don't get me some, my head'll burst."

"Oh stop it, stop it. You ought to be shut up in a sanatorium."

Claudette shoved her away, and she burst into a fit of sobbing. All the while the impassive Chinese girl lay gazing in silence at the door, as though she were expecting something or someone.

It was now dark. Claudette had barely touched the rice sprinkled with pieces of rotten fish which composed their supper. Natasha had sniffed up her very last pinch of snow, laboriously gleaned from the corners of the powder-box. It seemed to calm her down a little.

All of a sudden there came a sound of steps in the passage. Melle Bright Day became rigid. Claudette had gone deathly pale. But in place of the usual quartette of soldiers coming to throw themselves on to the Chinese girl, the Police officer appeared. Beckoning to Claudette with his finger, he called out:

"Hey . . . You . . . Come along with me."

Claudette hesitated a moment; then rose to her feet and went out. This time the detective did not take her to the ground-floor office, but to an apartment specially reserved for Colonel Nagano. The sitting-room, recently inhabited by an English family who had been expelled without warning, still held traces of its former occupants. Reproductions of Reynolds and of Alma Tadema adorned the walls. On one of the tables were back numbers of the *Tatler* and *Bystander*. An old pipe lay forgotten on the mantel-piece, together with an empty whisky bottle, and a novel by Hall Caine. The room was dingily lit by one lamp.

Claudette turned sharply round as she heard the Colonel's voice behind her. He was no longer in uniform. This time he wore a black and blue striped kimono, and walked in white stocking feet. His Imperial Majesty's savage warrior had changed and become instead the Nippon in evening dress. Although the room was cool, he fluttered a paper fan between his fat fingers.

He bowed courteously, and announced:

"Countess, tea is ready."

Claudette remained standing, so he took her forcibly by the hand and compelled her to sit down beside him on the divan. He fanned her politely with his right hand, at the same time squeezing her round the waist with his left. He spoke very gently to her, like a big strong man trying to soothe a nervous little girl:

"Well, my dear . . . Reflectioning has convinced you? . . . *Aber*

natiirlich. A gentleman is preferential to fifty brutes. Certainly . . . You say 'Can do' once only . . . Instead of fifty times."

The Colonel's powerful hand felt over Claudette's breast, crushing it. She cried out:

"You're hurting me . . .!"

"That's nothing. How you distribute the kiss? Me, I do like that. . . . European style . . . look see. . . . Pretty, eh? Each kiss . . . you . . . you . . . how do I express it? You get a bit liberty . . . *Aber* . . . Drink the tea first . . . to make you hot."

The Colonel's caresses were so painful that Claudette without thinking threw the whole contents of the cup in his face. He calmly wiped away the mess with the flap end of his kimono, and in so doing revealed his huge naked legs. Claudette started away in horror. He drew her back to him, this time laughing rather unpleasantly:

"Still a little rebelly? . . . Hey? . . . Why?"

He was clearly losing patience. His voice sounded less paternal now. With his enormous hand he gripped hold of Claudette's chin, drawing her mouth towards his, European style.

It was the call to battle. Claudette pushed him away from her with all her strength, and got up off the divan. He chased her round the room. The lamp crashed to the ground and went out, leaving them struggling in semi-darkness. The wretched girl could not contend against his powerful arms, and they rolled together on the floor among the upturned chairs.

At last the Colonel got up, leaving Claudette unconscious on the floor. He relit the lamp. He was contented and at the same time furious. He kicked her in the kidneys. She still lay there motionless, so he went and fetched a basin of water and threw the contents over her head.

The cold water revived Claudette, and she sat bolt upright, her eyes haggard. Bending towards her, his cheeks torn and bleeding from where her nails had scratched him, he said:

"*Savez*, Comtesse . . . You no damn good . . . Ah! *Pfui!* . . . No liberty for you. . . . *Aber* fifty soldiers learn you say 'can do'. . . . *Compris?* To-morrow . . . Fifty . . . All night."

He opened the door and called the private who was doing sentry-go in the passage. Ordering him to take the prisoner back to her cell, he added in Japanese:

"This hell-fiend is yours for to-morrow night. I hand her over to you with my compliments."

The sentry bowed himself almost double in token of his gratitude for this sudden display of generosity.

XXV

THE next morning, after a night of horror, Claudette woke up shattered, desperate, haunted by the idea of suicide.

Everything round her was calculated to send her mad. The Chinese woman, who had that night endured the customary ritual, lay watching the door with the fixed expression of a person in a state of trance. Natasha, whose supply of cocaine had definitely come to an end, was manifesting the symptoms of a drug-addict who knows that she has nothing left in life.

As the hours passed, her symptoms grew worse. Her hands shook with nervous agitation. She looked at Claudette and Melle Bright Day in turn, calling them to witness her distress:

"Tell me. Can you think of any possible means of getting some? I can't stand it much longer, you know . . . It's killing me . . . It's like a treadmill going round and round in my head . . . I'm terrified at the very idea, of having nothing to put up my nose to-night . . . Oh, it's agonizing! Oh, my powder, for Heaven's sake, get me some powder. Just one tiny little pinch, one tiny little pinch, that's all I need!"

Claudette, plaintive and almost unconscious, badly shaken by her experience with the Colonel, besought her.

"Be quiet, Natasha, for Heaven's sake. Don't go on fidgiting all the time . . . It's intolerable."

Natasha, entirely oblivious to Claudette's weakness, leant on her elbow and screamed at her:

"I can't go on . . . I can't go on. . . . Do something. There's not a grain left in my case. Spare me this torture! . . ."

And her moans died down only to be repeated an hour later.

The afternoon went by. Twilight crept over the heavens. It was time for the warder to bring them their supper, which consisted of three bowls of rice with a little dried fish. As his steps were heard coming along the passage, the Chinese girl, who was pacing up and down like a beast in a cage, stopped dead facing the door. The bolt creaked. The private on duty in the passage held open the door for the warder to come in with the food.

He put down the bowls on the floor as usual, but this time made a quick sign to the Chinese girl.

She rushed up close to him. He slipped a little white packet into her hand, and disappeared.

Natasha had been watching, and had observed the warder giving the little packet to Melle Bright Day. She threw herself at her like a mad thing:

"It's the drug, isn't it! It's the drug he's given you."

She hadn't addressed a word to the Chinese for many days. Melle Bright Day had already slipped the little packet into her dress. She answered quite calmly in a very correct English:

"No, it's not the drug."

"I'm sure it is . . .!"

"No."

"You liar!"

"Would you like to know what it really is?"

"I tell you it's coco . . . Come on, admit it . . . You're going to give me some."

Still in the same quiet tone, Melle Bright Day answered:

"It's poison."

Natasha, shaken, looked at her fellow-prisoner. She appeared unconvinced. At the word poison, Claudette had got to her feet. She approached the Chinese and whispered in her ear:

"Is it true? You've really got poison there?"

"Yes."

"How can you possibly consider . . ."

"Do you think one can go on for ever submitting to these savage beasts? Besides, I know what they've got in store for me. They're going to torture me soon for being a spy."

"But how in Heaven's name did you get hold of this . . .?"

"My best friend is the mistress of a major attached to the Nippon Headquarters. It was she who got it for me. It's my salvation . . . my sufferings are over now."

Claudette, to all appearance as calm as the Chinese girl, asked: "May I see it?"

The Chinese undid her dress, and produced the little white packet. She opened it very carefully, edging cautiously away so as to be out of reach of the other two women. She held up two brown pellets, hardly bigger than two coffee beans. She whispered:

"It's a Chinese drug. Acts very quickly."

"Is one enough?"

"Yes, only one."

"And you've got two?"

"Yes."

"Could you give me one?"

"Yes."

There was a mournful silence. Natasha and Claudette looked at each other. Melle Bright Day had solved her own problem. But there was only one pellet left for the other two.

Suddenly the Russian, in a state of uncontrollable irritability, screamed out:

"I must have it . . . It'll put an end to my suffering!" And she threw herself impulsively at the Chinese girl.

Melle Bright Day quickly hid the pellets in her dress and stood there, claws out, teeth bared in a snarl:

"Get away from me or I'll strangle you with my naked hands."

She pushed Natasha brutally away. Natasha slipped, fell, and bumped her head against the wall. She lay there, helpless, whimpering to herself. Claudette, whose display of calm had a reassuring effect upon the Chinese, said in an undertone:

"That wretched creature needs no help. Promise me you'll give me that second pellet this evening. I know *they'll* come and throw themselves on me, as they've done to you. Let's die together."

"I'll give it you, I promise. But not till later, otherwise that mad woman will take it from you by force. I can protect myself better than you can."

"Thank you."

Melle Bright Day made a ceremonious bow to confirm the agreement, as was only proper between two ladies of quality. She then resumed her accustomed crouching attitude in the corner. Claudette sat down in the corner opposite. The two women exchanged a look of understanding which seemed to fortify them both. They knew that they could disappoint the hopes of these unfettered beasts, who would be coming in to-night to indulge their appetites. They could overcome them. They had a weapon which protected them from insults, threats, blows, mortifications of the flesh and of the spirit. They had Death on their side, remorseless Death, which sneers in the face of lust-maddened manhood.



The dreadful occurrences at Bridge House became the sole topic of conversation among the white people of the Concessions. The neutral Europeans pitied the fate of their Anglo-Saxon friends. The most horrifying rumours began to circulate. It was said that forty men were shut up in huts which were only intended to hold twenty. The latrines stank and the food was foul; the place was rank with vermin. The sick were neglected. The prisoners, most of whom suffered from furunculosis, malaria, scurvy or dysentery, were subjected to constant cross examination on the part of the guards. The rebels, the people on the black list were struck and beaten; as for the Chinese, they were made to endure the water-torture, as in the Middle Ages, where water was pumped through

a tube down their noses into the pharynx and wind-pipe until they were nearly asphyxiated.

All the inhabitants of Shanghai who by good luck or by reason of their nationality had escaped internment, did their utmost to alleviate the suffering of these unfortunates.

The *Petit Trianon* was at present as silent as the grave. Boris and Magali lived there in a state of permanent tension and misery. Their inability to get news of Claudette, to send her anything to make her more comfortable, the evasive attitude of Mr. Azuma, all these things drove them to despair. Magali's relations with Boris were now entirely limited to the concern of a mother for her daughter's safety. She importuned him with questions about what steps he was taking; she never spoke to him unless to enquire the results of his protestations in influential circles.

Time passed. The Japanese had attacked the Philippines, where the American forces had put up a staunch resistance. They were now massing their divisions in Siam, preparing to invade Malaya. Singapore was soon to fall into their hands, likewise Hong-Kong, where the Stanley Prison atrocities brought home to the people of Shanghai what they might expect from these yellow devils let loose upon the white races.

One morning at about twelve o'clock, Boris returned home unexpectedly. Seeing the radiant expression on his face, Magali felt her heart begin to race. She cried out:

"What is it? Have you heard anything?"

"I've just seen Souvarine at the Soviet Consulate. He told me that his formal protest lodged at the Japanese Consulate had been forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo and returned with a favourable notification—the reason being that Claudette's case was an exceptional one. Souvarine heard this morning that she was to be released to-morrow, as soon as the order could be put through to the Imperial Police Force."

"Thanks be to God . . . ! Thanks be to God," repeated Magali as though a miracle had actually occurred.

"Yes, my darling. . . . Her sufferings are over. To-morrow morning at eight o'clock we'll go and fetch her in the car. We'll make her forget the miserable time she's had in prison."

All that afternoon, Magali, alone in the house, wandered from room to room, unable to control her impatience. At about six o'clock she felt she could stand it no longer, and went out without telling any one of the servants, without even leaving a message for Boris. She took her daughter's car and drove off to the detention-camp.

After prolonged parleyings Magali by sheer obstinacy managed to force her way into Captain Sinju's office. He received her coldly.

She explained to him what she wanted, namely, that they should release Countess Stolitzine this evening instead of waiting till to-morrow. Captain Sinju, looking at her in amazement, asked:

"Why should I do that for you?"

"Because I'm her mother . . . Captain, don't you understand my feelings, my longing to see her again? Is it such a dreadful thing to ask?"

"Wait a moment."

The officer summoned the plain-clothes detective and conversed with him in Japanese. The detective cast scornful eyes in Magali's direction, as though she were some excrement in human form. At last he went out. A quarter of an hour later he reappeared and had another conversation with Captain Sinju. The Captain, as he listened, smiled and nodded in a knowing way, as though he appreciated the full flavour of the message. In the end he said, turning to Magali:

"That's right. Countess Stolitzine is due to be released to-morrow at ten o'clock. Orders are orders, you know . . . Nevertheless, I'll give you permission to apply to a higher authority."

Magali, disappointed at first, took on fresh hope.

"To whom, Captain Sinju?"

"To Colonel Hideyo Nagano . . . the detective will take you to his office."

Magali followed eagerly behind the plain-clothes man, and in a moment found herself sitting face to face with Colonel Hideyo Nagano. She had never set eyes on him before. She thought him impressive, but was misled by his extreme courtesy of manner into thinking that he was actuated by the best intentions.

Once more she repeated her request. The Colonel listened, his head on one side, beating the usual tattoo upon his leather belt. His large beaming face seemed to Magali auspicious. When she had finished speaking, he sighed:

"Tsa . . . Tsa . . . Your solicitation not easy to answer 'Can do!' . . . *Aber* . . . Look see . . . Your daughter shall be enliberated to-morrow . . . to-morrow . . . Ten o'clock . . . catchy? *Dix heures*."

"Yes, Colonel, but . . ."

"*Ein* moment . . . Your desire have Countess enliberated this evening . . . the orders absolute . . . strict . . . Ten o'clock, to-morrow. *Aber* can do handsome offer to meet your solicitation half-way."

Magali gave Nagano a quick look. She had listened eagerly to every word that fell from his thick lips. He explained:

"*Ja* . . . *Ja* . . . *Beau geste* . . . Look see, would you like stay here in cell next door?"

The astonished Magali, in order to make quite sure that she had heard aright, repeated:

"You're proposing that I should sleep in the cell next door to my daughter?"

"You catchy my meaning okay . . . Very generous offer. Respect orders. Yes, always, *Aber* mother . . . daughter . . . *mère* . . . *fille* . . . one on one side, the other other . . . Hey? To-morrow *punkt zehn* . . . *Dix heures, vamos* can do. . . . Oh! I catchy. You very *nervos* . . ."

"I accept your offer with pleasure, Colonel."

"Out of compassion I allow . . ."

"I quite understand. Thank you. Would you be so kind as to inform my daughter that to-night I shall be lying close beside her; it will help her to sleep if she knows I'm there."

The Colonel had got up. His hairy hands beat faster and faster on his belt as his excitement increased. He was enjoying to the full this final stroke of genius, like an ogre licking his lips in anticipation of a tasty meal. He replied courteously:

"Inform Countess? So sorry . . . *Dommage*. No can do. Military regulations very strict . . . Poor Countess not *savez* that the mother sleep neighbour. Regret. . . . *Dommage* . . . So sorry."

Magali thanked him again. At least the Colonel was doing his best. One must appreciate his good intentions.

The detective entered. Nagano spoke to him at length in Japanese, while he sat there listening. His training enabled him to conceal his surprise, but secretly the Colonel's plan appeared to him as one of the most brilliant inventions he had ever known, as regards the treatment of the inferior races. He bowed several times to Nagano, uttering his parting words with bated breath, as a tribute to superior genius.

He led Magali away.

She was in such a hurry to see her daughter that the very thought of sleeping to-night so close to her, with only a wall between them, already eased her spirit.

They walked together along the first-floor passage until they came to the door of the last cell. Here the detective stopped. The cell was separated from Claudette's by five others, all of which had been filled with Chinese suspects. Before leaving her, the detective, carefully coached in advance by the Colonel, said obligingly:

"You can sleep quite peacefully here, Madame. Here are some blankets . . . The Colonel wishes you to make yourself very comfortable." Then, as though he were offering her a special favour, he added in a low voice:

"There's only this wall between you and Countess Stolitzine."

Magali stared hard at the partition, as though she hoped that

her penetrating vision might crumble it to dust. The detective stroked the wall, and with a smile of sympathy, which was in fact a masterpiece of treachery, murmured:

"Your daughter is there . . . behind these bricks . . . I advise you not to attempt to communicate with her. The regulations are very strict. The sentry in the passage might intervene and . . . well, a bayonet thrust is not a pleasant sensation. Rest content in the knowledge that your daughter is spending her last night at Bridge House . . . To-morrow she'll be free."

"You're quite sure?"

"I've seen it written down in black and white. It's quite in order."

"So I can really rely on it?"

"Of course you can, Madame . . . Good night, Madame."

The policeman bowed and went out. The bolt creaked in its hinges. Magali, in this bare unfurnished cell, lit by a tiny electric bulb hung from the ceiling, felt almost happy. Fifteen hours was not a long time to wait. To-morrow as she left the cell, she would have the comfort and joy of taking her daughter once more in her arms.



It was a dark night. Silence reigned in the passage. From time to time, the sentry's footsteps clicked along the flagstones. At about ten o'clock Captain Sinju returned to his office on the ground floor, and summoned the detective:

"Are they ready?" he said.

"Yes, Captain. They're waiting at the entrance to Passage Two."

"Are they impatient?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you?"

"Oh. Me!"

"You've got my full permission, if you feel so disposed . . . Chinese or White?"

"Perhaps the White, just for fun."

"We can let them go now. Come along with me."

Captain Sinju leapt up the staircase on his short little legs. An N.C.O. on the landing saluted him. The Captain issued his orders curtly:

"Five men in front of Cell Two."

"Ready, Captain."

"Good. Those five to deal with the Chinese in Number Two . . . the cell next door to the one occupied by the mother of the prisoner in Cell Seven."

"Yes, Captain."

"I want fifty more, Colonel's orders, for the Stolitzine woman, Cell Seven. Where are they?"

"I have the first company of twenty-five waiting, sir."

"Good. Those are to begin in an hour. When they've finished, bring in the other twenty-five. The procedure to last till ninety-fourty-five to-morrow morning; Colonel's orders."

"Very good, sir."

The N.C.O. saluted. Captain Sinju went downstairs. The men, knowing their instructions, were grinning all over their faces. This was the kind of drill they enjoyed. Among them were men who had taken part in the sack of Nanking, where they had pillaged, plundered and raped with the joy of gorillas loosened from their chains. Now they were returning to the old days of war with the gloves off, so life was good.

The first squad of five men, assigned to the cell of the Chinese woman next to Magali, halted in the passage. They squatted down on the flagstones, close against the wall, waiting their turn. The detective at last unlocked the door, and made a sign to the nearest:

"Go in, you . . .!"

The man entered the room, head bent. He was greeted by a cry of terror.

Magali had pulled the blankets over her head to keep off the cold. The sudden cry woke her as she was dozing off to sleep. She sat bolt upright in order to hear better. There was a confused mumble of voices in the passage, and a sound of steps entering the cell in which Claudette was supposed to be lying. She thought at first that it must have been a warder bringing in some food. Then came a dull thud against the wall, a noise like a body falling; then another muffled cry; then the piercing screams of a woman struggling to defend herself.

Magali rushed close up to the wall in her anxiety to find out what was happening. It sounded as though two people were wrestling. Straining her ears hard, she heard a man's heavy chuckle. Then suddenly her mind ceased to work. Her own imaginings terrified her. She tried hard to banish such a supposition from her mind, but the proof was all too evident.

She stood facing the wall, her eyes in a fixed stare, like a person watching some appalling spectacle, unable to avert his gaze. A curious sense of torpor crept over her, numbing her senses, as in a nightmare, where the sleeper, helpless, feels himself sucked down into a deep pit.

A fresh noise made her jump. The door of the next cell had again been opened and shut. There was a sound of hurrying footsteps and another cry of distress, quickly stifled by a hand.

At this point Magali threw herself against the wall like a maniac. She beat upon it with clenched fists, yelling out:

"Stop it . . . Stop it . . . For God's sake!"

Five times in succession she heard the same ritual repeated: footsteps, then the grinding of the bolt, then the cries for help. She thought she was going mad. Suddenly the bolt of her own cell was drawn back, and the detective appeared. She looked at him as though he were a ghost. At first she could not understand a word he said. He had bowed to her very politely, his hands to his sides, and was saying:

"Madame, please forgive us . . . There has been a mistake . . . we have put you into the wrong cell."

Magali hadn't taken in a word. She stammered: "What? What d'you say?"

The detective repeated with an air of great deference:

"I was trying to explain to you, Madame, that there had been an unfortunate error. I told you that your cell was next to that of your daughter. It was a mistake. The woman next door is a Chinese girl of no importance. So if you heard . . . er . . . anything . . . forget it."

Magali was gradually recovering her wits. The detective finally succeeded in calming her by adding:

"I shall now take you to another cell which is really the one next to your daughter. By that means I shall prove to you that I have made an unfortunate mistake."

Magali followed the detective. He discreetly opened the door of Cell 2, and allowed Magali to look inside. She caught a fleeting glimpse of a Chinese woman struggling in a soldier's arms.

Magali, against her will, gave a great sigh of relief. Following the detective still farther, she came at last to Cell 6, adjoining the cell in which Claudette was imprisoned. Cell 6 had obviously been only recently evacuated; it was dirty, and stank to high heaven. The detective once again apologized.

"Madame, this time you won't be disturbed. Your daughter's next door. She's sleeping peacefully. I hope you'll do the same, and once again accept our most humble apologies."

The door closed behind her. The plain-clothes man went straight down to Colonel Nagano's office to report. The Colonel rapped out:

"Well, have the orders been carried out?"

"Yes, Colonel. The mother had her *hors d'œuvre* when she heard the cries of the Chinese woman in Number Two. She was shaken to the core. I've just shown her in to Cell Six with my most abject apologies."

"Good . . . Good . . . The cold douche first and then the hot. That's the way to treat these bitches of white women."

The five men went downstairs with the air of triumphant cockerels. They were grinning and gobbling with satisfaction. They exchanged sly digs with the others, the twenty-five candidates for Cell 7. Those twenty-five were the favoured ones, the ones who had been singled out for exemplary conduct on the battle-field. They were to be given a white woman, like their comrades in Hong-Kong. And, moreover, no common prostitute, such as they could pick up any evening in the Chapei quarter, but an aristocrat, a woman of high society.

The N.C.O. looked at his watch. Ten minutes to go before the pack was let loose. He conversed with the detective in low tones, asking him whether he too had been granted permission to go and help himself in the cell. The officer answered yes, he had; it was actually the Colonel's orders that he was to be present at the ceremony.

It was now a question of precedence between the plain-clothes man, the representative of the Japanese secret service in Shanghai and the infantry sergeant of the 28th Brigade in Kobé. The plain-clothes man had got his permit from the Colonel, and the soldier only from the Captain. They vied with each other in courtesy. Should the Honourable representative of the Secret Service take precedence over the Honourable N.C.O. of the Imperial Army? In the ordinary way the soldier would have had first choice, but in this case the civilian had, so to speak, received a visa from the Colonel. Moreover, the N.C.O. was on cordial and intimate terms with the detective, his senior in years, and the N.C.O.'s father, by profession a gardener, had often worked in the honourable garden belonging to the detective's uncle, in Kamakura. After much bowing and scraping, the detective agreed to allow his fellow-countryman to open fire. The detective was blasé. After eight years in Shanghai, where he was earning full pay in the Japanese secret service, he'd had many an opportunity to indulge his tastes with European women. Before the outbreak of war, white women without colour prejudice had been ready enough to submit to his manly caresses and to his ingenuity as a lover. It was only fair that he should give first place to a young warrior who had never before tasted such a succulent dish.

The recreation hour had at last arrived. The N.C.O. assembled his first section, and stood them in line along the passage, near the door of Cell 7. He looked down at his wrist watch and exchanged a quick glance with the detective. The latter, before opening the door, gave him his final instructions:

"In the right-hand corner is a Chinese girl . . . in the left-hand corner a Russian cocaine addict . . . She'll be on the list later on. The one you're after, you and your men, is the one at the back, in

the corner by the window. But I advise you to take it slowly. Mark my words. . . . Fear excites white women."



Claudette and Melle Bright Day, as silent as two prisoners condemned to death, had not touched their plate of rice nor drank out of the little jug of water placed beside them. They were watching their companion Natasha, who, lying stretched out on her stomach, was grinding her teeth or gnawing at her blanket, whining the while. Her need for the drug was like a furnace, burning her up. She had made repeated assaults upon the Chinese girl in a desperate effort to get hold of the poison.

When Claudette at last heard the steps of the men in the passage, she realized that the hour had come, and, walking calmly up to Melle Bright Day, stretched out her hand to receive the poison. The Chinese girl sat listening in silence for a while; then, herself convinced of the imminence of the danger, gave one of the capsules to her companion. Pointing to the little jug of water, she whispered:

"Swallow some of the water with it. . . . There's opium in the poison. You'll hardly feel anything."

Claudette followed her instructions. Then Melle Bright Day, in her turn, swallowed the fatal dose. Scarcely had Claudette put down the little jug when the bolt slipped back in the lock.

The N.C.O. came in. The detective, standing on the threshold, pointed towards Claudette. At the sight of her the N.C.O. grinned broadly, revealing a row of yellow teeth. He shut the door behind him and stood there for a moment, appraising his victim from a distance. Claudette had retreated to the corner. She stared the soldier straight in the eyes. She was no longer frightened. She knew the man could do her no harm. That grinning animal face meant nothing. Nothing meant anything any more.

The Nippon, for his part, remembering the detective's final words, 'Fear excites white women,' was content to bide his time. The smile vanished from his face. He set his black eyes upon his victim in a stare. He took one step forward, then another, intending thereby to ripen her fears, to add the ultimate flavour to the delicious fruit. He waited for her to cry out, to whine and whimper. Why did this woman show no sign of alarm? The Honourable detective had made it quite clear to him that white women must be terrified in order to get the best out of them. Why was she so impassive, so uncaring, standing erect in the far corner of the room? Why this apparent indifference? Was she so accustomed to

submitting to men of different nationalities that a mere Japanese N.C.O. could not impress her. And yet he had been told that she was a woman of high rank. The whole thing was beyond him. He could not guess that the poison was already beginning to work in Claudette's body, anaesthetizing her lower limbs, causing strange buzzings in her head, disturbing her vision, so that the outside world was becoming gradually distorted.

The N.C.O. grew angry and shouted out something in Japanese, something which Claudette could not understand but which sounded like a threat.

On the other side of the partition, Magali, reassured, was preparing for sleep. But once more the sound of a male voice in Claudette's cell caused her to spring up with a start. An awful terror took hold of her. She ran to the door. There were whisperings all along the passage, punctuated by hoots of stifled laughter. The Jap warriors were giggling to themselves at the idea of the N.C.O. enjoying himself in the cell.

Suddenly the mask was lifted from Magali's eyes, and she saw the whole situation with a dreadful clarity. The detective had tricked her, she realized that now, and she realized too the horrifying sadism of the whole organization. They were playing wantonly upon her nerves—it was better to resign herself to the worst. Hearing one of Natasha's long drawn-out moans, she imagined that it was Claudette who was being attacked. With the fury of desperation she beat against the wall with all the strength in her arms. She beat frenziedly, as though her blows might serve some purpose, at the same time crying out:

"Claudette! Claudette!"

From the other side of the wall Claudette heard her cry. Fading as she was into unconsciousness, she imagined that it was her mother's voice calling her from another world. She roused herself from the torpor into which she was gradually sinking, and herself turned her face to the wall, beating against it with her fists as her mother had done:

"Mother," she cried. "Mother!"

Claudette's voice sounded faint and muffled in her mother's ears. Magali screamed louder and louder, indifferent to the pain that she was causing herself by bruising and battering her hands.

"Claudette . . . I'm here . . . ! Claudette, darling, it's all right, I'm here."

But now there was no response from the other side of the wall.

The N.C.O. had no desire to waste his time listening to the cries of distress between mother and daughter. He seized Claudette by the hair and dragged her forcibly round. She crumpled up and fell down on to the floor. He took her by the hair of her head and

shook her; it was infuriating that she should be paying him so little attention. Not only was she not frightened, but she did not even appear to notice him. It was an unpardonable insult to an N.C.O. in the Imperial Army. He was going to teach this aristocrat manners. He failed to notice Claudette's eyes, over which a film had begun to settle, and which saw nothing now save the blurred outline of a face above her, indistinct as a writhing mask reflected in water. He began to strike her. He kicked and beat this woman whose indifference drove him wild; on his knees, straddling her waist, he struck and struck at her with the fury of scorned manhood.

But his blows had no effect. Suddenly he stopped, feeling ashamed of himself. He turned round to see what the other two women were doing. The Chinese girl was there, lying on her side in the corner. Her eyes were half-open; unseeing eyes. In his amazement he got up and went across to her. He lifted up her arm; it fell down lifeless.

At that very moment Natasha rose up from her corner, her pupils dilated, staring like a mad woman. She yelled:

"Hey you . . . I want some coco . . . ! Give me some coco, I tell you."

The N.C.O. looked round. He hadn't understood a word. Shrugging his shoulders, he turned his attentions once more to Claudette. She was sitting down, propped up against the wall, her head leaning to one side. The N.C.O. was about to deal her one more buffet, when the unfortunate creature slumped sideways of her own accord, like a doll collapsing. The Jap leaned over her, and saw that she was insensate, just like the Chinese girl. Her limbs were nerveless, her eyes glazed. He took hold of her by the hair. Her head fell back. He thought she must be dead.

Dead? He looked round again at the Chinese girl. Was she dead too? His warrior's courage began to fail him, and he felt himself trembling. There was something uncanny about these two sudden deaths, which disturbed his superstitious soul. He who had never shown fear in the face of the enemy, trembled before the unknown, the inexplicable. With two senseless, to all appearances dead figures, one on either side of him, he felt himself alone and unprotected against some evil influence.

All of a sudden Natasha, who had crept up silently behind him, seized him by the neck, yelling out:

"You've got coco . . . I know you have! Give it to me or I'll strangle you!"

Natasha's unsatisfied craving gave her the strength of ten. Her fingers were like iron round the man's throat. He could hardly breathe, paralysed as he was by his superstitious fears. Freeing

himself at last from her vice-like grip, he turned round and saw Natasha's white face and staring eyes. Here was a woman obviously possessed by the devil. Before she had time to clutch hold of him again, he drew his steel bayonet from its scabbard, and, savagely, with a 'Han . . . !' which seemed somehow to relieve his terror, plunged it up to the hilt in the Russian woman's breast.



Colonel Hideyo Nagano, Mr. Kimura and Paolo Borgia were sitting together in Mr. Azuma's flat. The four geishas on duty fluttered around their guests, pouring *saké* into the little blue Kaolin glasses, lighting their cigarettes and taking a humble part in the conversation. To the devil with business that night. The Imperial H.Q. had announced the sinking of a British cruiser and destroyer along the coast of Malaya. Joy reigned in the Consulate. Paolo Borgia was proud to have been invited to lift his glass in honour of the Japanese pilots.

Paolo was satisfied by the turn of events. As far as he was concerned, his plans had succeeded admirably. His revenge was now complete. Mr. Azuma had informed him of Claudette's imprisonment, of Boris and Magali's despair, of the intervention of the Soviet Consulate, of the well-contrived hitch in the reply from Tokyo, which was calculated to prolong the agony in the *Petit Trianon*.

When Mr. Azuma had told Paolo that Tokyo had sent orders that Countess Stolitzine was to be released, Paolo had sulked. Was he to be deprived of his revenge? Mr. Azuma hastened to reassure him. Colonel Nagano, he said, held the Commendatore in real affection and esteem, and had promised that Claudette's release would be worse than her imprisonment.

Paolo bided his time. He was curious to know the interpretation of these sibylline prophecies.

That evening, after supper, he was hoping to take the Colonel aside and get a little information out of him. At about half-past eleven, there was a ring on the private telephone connecting the Consulate with the Colonel's flat. Mr. Kimura answered it, and then handed over the receiver to the Colonel.

The big man had drunk a lot of *saké* and was in excellent humour. He listened with growing attention to Captain Sinju's report to date. He listened for what seemed hours. Finally he put down the receiver, clapped the geishas out of the room, and burst into a roar of laughter. At length he condescended to communicate the joke to his friends, who were sitting round the table, mouths

agape. First he spoke in Japanese. Mr. Azuma asked him a few questions. The Colonel gave him a little more information, and ended with an expression which must have been very funny, because Azuma and Kimura began giggling quietly into the sleeves of their jackets.

Mr. Kimura translated the message to Paolo, who was absolutely agog with excitement:

"My dear friend," he said, "there has been a little 'incident' at Bridge House. Countess Stolitzine has committed suicide, no doubt in order to avoid having to accept the compliments which Captain Sinju's soldiers were prepared to offer her. It's a pity that she had not the good grace to remain there one night longer, for to-morrow she would have been returned safe and sound to her home. Her thoughtlessness has caused some embarrassment between our Consulate and the Soviets."

Paolo was careful to conceal his joy. He had learnt from his dealings with the Japanese that it was unhealthy to show signs either of pleasure or of sorrow. He merely replied:

"My dear friend, you haven't translated to me the Colonel's last words, that last remark of his which seemed to amuse you."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. The Honourable Colonel Nagano said, 'We shall respect diplomatic formalities to the end. We shall return the body to the family.'"

EPILOGUE

AT the summit of the rocky slopes which rise steeply above the Yang-Tse, upstream from Chung-king, about four miles inland from the capital, stands a white house with green tiles; a vast one-storied house surrounded by a courtyard studded with dwarf trees. At the entrance, under a Chinese portico, waves the flag of the Red Cross, indicating that Father Bonvallet's mission-house has been converted into a hospital.

Father Bonvallet, of the Brotherhood of White Missionaries, has become a legendary figure in the upper Yang-Tse valley.

In the forty years in which he has spread the Gospel among the Chinese, in the forty years in which he has guided their souls and cared for their bodies he has earned a well-merited popularity.

Mandarins, high officials, doctors, students, all know him by the name of Hsien Sheng, which, being interpreted means 'The Old Man' and betokens respect. Poor people whom he has cured, women whom he has helped in childbirth, children whom he has saved from death, all reverence this saintly man, with his thin ascetic frame and bearded face, like Jesus our Saviour, and his Job-like poverty.

Father Bonvallet's career in China, like that of most of his colleagues, had been dramatic and full of incident. He had been a young missionary in Korea in 1905, and had witnessed the sack of Seoul, barely escaping with his life from the Japanese armed forces. Then again May 1938 he had been wounded in a Japanese air-raid over Kaifeng. His experiences had taught him to hate those heathen sadists, whose chief aim in life was to destroy, under the shadow of the Imperial Standard.

At the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, when the Marco Polo bridge near Peking was attacked, Father Bonvallet was already settled near Chung-king in the Home of the White Missionaries. His sympathy for the unhappy population of China decided him to offer his services as a voluntary physician. The authorities were only too happy to accept him in their ranks. In collaboration with Chiang Kai Shek's Headquarters staff, he converted his mission-house into a hospital for wounded officers. He nursed them, comforted them, and encouraged them to fight for the good cause of China regenerated by the great Sun-Yat-Sen.



One morning an ambulance arrived with five officers, wounded in the recent battles of the Yun-Nan. Father Bonvallet, whose knowledge of medicine was of great use to his young Chinese colleague, helped him to perform five very serious operations.

He then returned to his office, and called the matron, who was in charge of three Chinese voluntary nurses, former students in the French University in Peking.

"Mrs. Hobson," he said, "I'm handing over to you these five new patients. They are airmen who trained with General Chen-nault's Flying Tigers. I have complete confidence in you, as always, and give thanks to God for having placed you in my path."

"Oh no, Father. It is I who should be grateful for having . . ."

"No! No! It was our unexpected good fortune to find in Chung-king a woman of great courage like yourself, whose energy and devotion are beyond praise."

Magali lowered her eyes; she blushed with pleasure at the missionary's words.

"Father, you don't know how encouraged I am by the noble example you have set me."

"It isn't noble to do one's duty; it's as natural as drawing breath."

"When I've finished nursing the wounded officers, will you grant me a favour?"

"What favour?"

"To-night, after dinner . . . may I speak to you . . . in confidence?"

"Of course."

"Thank you, Father."

Magali, who had risen at dawn that morning, bustled about with her young assistants, helping to nurse the fresh arrivals. Towards midday she went and lay down for half an hour in her room, a tiny cell with whitewashed walls, furnished with a camp bed, two chairs, and a very primitive dressing-table. Two pictures alone relieved the austerity of this apartment with its barred windows. The first, hung up on the wall, was a badly-framed chromo-lithograph reproduction of Raphael's Madonna in the Sistine Chapel, the second a large photograph in a silver-gilt frame, which stood on the little table beside the camp bed. It was a photograph of Claudette in her wedding-dress. A night-light, made out of a wick fixed into the notch of a cup filled with oil, burned day and night in front of the picture.

Magali, in her nurse's uniform, was lying down on the bed. Physically she was weary, but her brain was not tired at all. She couldn't close her eyes. Her existence during the last six months played itself out in her memory like the same film repeated over and over again. Her life's drama tormented her like the Erynies of the Greek legend. Whenever Magali's mind was not absorbed by her daily duties at the mission-house, the past rose up before her, clawing at her, bringing its melancholy train of regrets, remorse and sorrow.

· Like the Oriental torture of the drop of water made to fall day and night upon the victim's skull, her recollections formed a pitiless chain in her mind from the day of Claudette's arrest. She saw herself once more, after her night of horror in the cell, hearing from that smiling, courteous detective the news of the unfortunate accident that had occurred to Countess Stolitzine; she saw herself returning home like a distraught creature who can understand nothing and no one any more, watching as they brought her dead child back to the *Petit Trianon*, weeping long hours over her grave, lying day after day in silence in that large funereal mansion

in the Avenue Joffre, turning a deaf ear to Boris's attempts at consolation.

What martyrdom! Alone in the world which had no more sense or purpose.

She recollected her ultimate decision, made one morning while Boris was away. She must leave Shanghai at all costs, even if it meant being shot by one of the Japanese sentries posted around the Concessions. But to leave Shanghai by sea was impossible. There were no more ships sailing. The only way out was through the interior of China; it was an escape which needed careful preparation in advance, aided and abetted by the Chinese, to enable her to penetrate through into the winding valley of the Yang-Tse.

By sheer determination and with the help of bribes, she had managed to get a passage on one of those Chinese boats which ply from Shanghai to Hang-Kow. Dressed as a Ché-Kiang peasant woman, in black trousers, short dark-blue coat and black velvet kerchief, her hair drawn away from her ears, she had got through the Nippon barrier without mishap. She was supposed to be acting as *amah* to a Chinese family, and shared their uncomfortable existence on board this dirty, noisy, slow-moving vessel, crowded with the riff-raff of the Chinese population.

From Hang-Kow she had continued her journey to Chung-king in an even smaller boat. Like a woman possessed, she went straight ahead, unable to stop, seeking forgetfulness, trying to shake off the cloak of Nessus which remorse had flung across her shoulders. She had a strange conviction that a change of scene would alleviate her distress, and that as she increased the distance between Shanghai, Boris, and herself, so would she grow calmer in spirit.

By chance she had met Father Bonvallet at the United States Consulate in Chung-king. The missionary, astonished to see this woman dressed as a Chinese peasant, and yet understanding not a single word of what a Chinaman was explaining to her, came to her rescue and thereby discovered her true nationality. The following morning he had called on her at the Great Eastern, a small hotel standing by itself, with houses in ruins all around. He had confessed her, and even given her moral exhortation.

The gentleness and understanding of this saintly man, who suspected some secret drama in Magali's life, had worked miracles. She gave up the idea of wandering aimlessly about, and decided to take up this useful work in the Hospital of the White Missionaries. With the despair of a shipwrecked woman, she had seized hold of the idea, and the very next day, silent and industrious,

had started her duties as a nurse under the ægis of Father Bonvallet.

Magali's Confession had not been complete. She had explained to the missionary only half the cause of her distress. But her daily contact with him, their collaboration in this ceaseless struggle against death, the devotion and boundless admiration which she felt for him, decided her to seize the first opportunity to open her heart to him.



That evening, after dinner, Magali knocked timidly on the office door. The missionary was waiting for her.

He himself had by now formed a deep attachment for this white woman, his compatriot, this voluntary worker whom Providence had placed in his path at the very moment when her services were most needed.

During his forty years of life in the Far East, he had seen and observed much. He was one of those more tolerant missionaries, less concerned with the letter of the Catholic faith than with the propagation of Christian morality. If a service had to be cancelled to enable him to nurse one of his disciples who had gone sick, he never hesitated. He had altered the authorized Catechism to suit his listeners, whose language, longings and weaknesses he knew so well.

His hierarchical seniors dared not criticize his methods, because his apostleship worked wonders wherever he preached the word of God. But they occasionally rebuked him in a friendly fashion for treating religious rites and traditions in such a cavalier fashion. Monseigneur Nanchez, Bishop of Canton *in partibus*, on a tour of his diocese, remarked to him one day in Ping-Tu, in the province of Shantung:

"My dear brother, you will forgive me if I make a little criticism of your methods, man to man. . . . You are stretching that old French proverb, 'the end justifies the means,' just a little too fine. You indulge the baser instincts of your Chinese followers in order to bring them round to Christianity. Without wishing to offend you, I must say that you remind me of an adulteress who over-paints her face in order to win the affections of the man she covets."

Father Bonvallet, his fine black eyes lit with a bright flame, had retorted:

"Ah, well, Monseigneur, what do those nasty ointments matter once the love is born?" And he had added, with a large good-natured grin upon his face: "My little flock start by being grate-

ful for the material comforts I bring them . . . I feed them first . . . then I nurse them and comfort them . . . lastly faith does its work. For you see, Monseigneur, the road to the soul lies through the digestive organs."

Father Bonvallet, on first meeting Magali, had at once suspected that there had been some recent tragedy in her life. By the exercise of gentleness and tact, he had managed slightly to ease her suffering. He knew that one day this sad, reserved woman would come and confide in him the secret of her grief.

That day had come.

Magali sat down in front of him, and began:

"Father, a month ago to-day you met a stray creature wandering aimlessly about Chung-king. I made a partial Confession to you then. Now I wish to complete it."

"My dear child, I'll hear your Confession willingly."

"Your kind protectiveness, your good example, all these things make me feel I wish to talk to you. I won't put on any tragic airs . . . I won't say I am the victim of circumstances . . . Oh no! Father, there sits before you a guilty woman . . . a woman who has not yet expiated her crime . . . Father, I killed my daughter."

Father Bonvallet, who had eased many a burdened conscience, and was not easily taken aback, actually gave a start of surprise.

"Oh," went on Magali, "I did not literally shoot her with a revolver. But I'm responsible for her death. And she was barely twenty years old."

Magali began to tell the story of her life. The missionary listened attentively. At last he seemed to understand the reason for her previous silence and reserve. Having finished her recital, Magali dried her tears. Father Bonvallet was about to answer her, when she burst out again with the violence of a suffering, contrite soul:

"You see, Father, that my responsibility is overwhelming. Merely to say '*mea culpa*' before you doesn't expiate my crime. . . . And yet I adored my Claudette. I wanted so much to see her happy. She had grown into such a beautiful young girl, so much admired and sought after. I thought of nothing but her success, that she should have everything a young girl can covet to satisfy her pride; a rich, respected husband . . . I wanted to see her looked up to by the world. . . . I wanted her to be rich . . . money makes life so much easier . . . I wanted her to have everything. I wanted nothing for myself, that I can swear to you . . . my life was more or less over . . . That was until the fatal day when my feelings as a woman, not as a mother, began to get the upper hand, and I fell in love with Boris Stolzine . . . And when I say 'fell in love,' that's not the exact term . . . I loved him insanely,

worshipped him. By sinning with him, under the false pretext that I was therefore keeping him at home, making him fonder of Claudette, I signed my poor little child's death-warrant. I tried hard to persuade myself that I was acting with the best intentions—I knew in my heart of hearts that it was a lie, that I was acting out of pure egotism. I took her husband from her, and God has punished me cruelly, that's all . . . My ambitions for Claudette caused her downfall. . . . Poor darling . . . ! She was so modest, so unconcerned. Father, you should have heard her calm, sensible remarks, the way she talked me down whenever I got over-excited. She would have been quite happy with a quiet, unbrilliant husband; a man she could have loved—she didn't want money, jewels, fame, luxury . . . But I, alas, wanted her to have those things. That thrice accursed day when I invented the fictitious Baroness de Mauchamp, that was the day I opened Pandora's box and let out all the misery and evil. Caught in the quicksand of my own treachery, I floundered about until the dreadful climax, a deliberate climax, too, arranged with devilish ingenuity by Paolo Borgia, Boris Stolitizine's business partner. We discovered all that later. If I hadn't thrown my poor darling into Stolitizine's arms, the jealous vindictive Borgia wouldn't have brought this horrible revenge upon her head. Father, there's no way I can atone for my crime."

Father Bonvallet listened in silence to Magali's tragic story. He was moved by the intensity of her suffering, and at the same time rather abashed by her complete candour. She stopped talking for a while, and then began once more:

"What makes me so desperate is the feeling of having lost Claudette's affection. Father, that's the hardest thing of all I have to bear. Till my dying day I shall reproach myself for that. If only you could have seen the sympathy that was between us, if you could have realized how mutual our affection was, how lasting, how cloudless . . . Never a clash between us . . . no anger, no misunderstandings. She confided everything to me; I used to talk to her like someone of my own age . . . and I destroyed all that merely by allowing myself to be seduced by that man. Why did I do it? Tell me, Father . . . Is the flesh so weak that a woman who has remained respectable until her fortieth year can suddenly kick aside the traces, and lose all sense of decency and self-respect? For that's what I did. It was a wind of passionate folly sweeping me suddenly off my feet. And for the sake of that folly, I was ready to slay my daughter's affection. I can still hear her saying 'I believed in you, Mother.' And now, when I look back and remember that she died in that prison, that, feeling herself utterly abandoned, she decided to take her life, a great agony wells up

inside me . . . Just imagine, Father . . . my poor child at the mercy of those savages, unable even to conjure up the vision of her mother before closing her eyes in death . . . It's frightful!"

Father Bonvallet waited while Magali burst into a fresh fit of weeping. After a few moments he laid his hand on the unfortunate woman's shoulder, and said:

"Mrs. Hobson, are you a Catholic?"

Stiffing her sobs, Magali answered:

"Yes, yes, I'm a Catholic; but at Saigon and in Shanghai I didn't attend Mass very regularly."

"That doesn't matter. Do you believe in God?"

"Oh! Yes, when I'm very unhappy."

"Good. Well listen to me . . . I'm not going to say to you, as that old curate would have done in the little provincial parish where your parents were born, that you must do penance in order to obtain absolution. . . . No . . . True absolution is not given to you by God's representative on earth. It's you yourself who must search your own heart, and, if you have the courage, discover it there. . . . I will explain what I mean. . . . When your poor daughter died, what was the first thought that came to you?"

"I thought of suicide."

"And then you went away all by yourself, recklessly, like a lost soul pursued by remorse and vain regrets. When you lay at night on the deck of the boat which took you up the Yang-Tse river, when you gazed up at the stars you must have realized that happiness can never be built up upon lies. You had erected a weak structure of trickeries and deceptions upon which you hoped to balance your daughter's happiness. The collapse was inevitable. You also indulged in a guilty love-affair with Boris Stolitzine. I am glad that you appreciate the folly of your self-deception . . . In former times a woman in your position had no choice but suicide or the convent. Our faith has condemned suicide as the coward's way out. Yes, child . . . The solution of the deserter in face of the enemy. It's shameful and contemptible. As for the convent, it's the lazy solution of a woman who secludes herself in her recollections and wallows in her grief. It's narcissism in its truest form. I, as an old warrior of the Catholic faith, a simple soldier in the battle-field in which one grapples with life instead of taking refuge behind a convent's walls, I offer you a third solution . . . to fight! Yes, my child, fight for others against the forces of evil. Instead of nursing your sorrows, hugging them to yourself as precious things, I suggest that you should join the ranks of those who are fighting the evil elements of the outside world. Let me make myself clear. By the forces 'of evil' I do not mean those capital crimes which turn men into swine, guzzlers,

murderers, tyrants, or rogues; I mean germs, incendiary bombs, epidemics, natural disturbances, those apocalyptic horsemen who strike down good and bad alike . . . To people like yourself, who have known frightful pain and suffered haunting tragedy, I offer a remedy against remorse: to fight! To every Christian who feels in his heart that he is written down as a debtor in the Great Book of Humanity, I cry: 'Friend . . . You wish to square your account? . . . I will show you the way. Here, at this wicket-gate, lies a suffering soul, a victim of the brutality of his fellow-men. You can look after him. At this other gate another soul lies weeping, a victim to his own gullibility. You can comfort him. Go farther afield; you will find many others who need a helping hand or a word of encouragement. Having portioned out to all these sick people, these unhappy sufferers, these victims of a world in flames the consolation of your goodness, then you can thank God, because the absolution you were seeking for, you will have already obtained by the sheer strength of your arm. Remember, Mrs. Hobson, what Christ said: 'Upon this earth I will build my church.' And you, following in Christ's footsteps, will say 'And I, by my desire to do good in the world, will find my own salvation.'"

Father Bonvallet got up and stood facing Magali. She looked at him without moving, fascinated by the light of conviction which burned in his eyes, this man who for so many years had put his teachings into practice. His tall, erect figure, stalwart as an oak tree, appeared to her in almost superhuman light. In his faded, worn-out cassock he seemed nobler, more impressive than any sovereign in purple robes.

She dared not answer him. She sat looking at him, her hands trembling, her eyes set in a stare of wonderment, already converted by his noble example.

He went on in his inspired, ringing voice:

"Mrs. Hobson, I need a fellow-soldier to fight by my side. It will need two of us to stand up against the forces of evil to which I referred just now. Life requires its stretcher-bearers, both in war and peace. I think I can rely on you."

Magali answered in a low, impassioned tone, more significant than any cry:

"Yes, Father."

Then she in turn got to her feet, and enquired hesitantly:

"To ratify our pact, will you grant me a favour?"

"What is it, my child?"

Magali stammered out with difficulty:

"I would like you to teach me how to pray again . . . Just out of devotion to my daughter's memory."

She bent her head, and confessed sadly:

"Will you help me? I am afraid I have rather . . . forgotten."

"Of course I will, Mrs. Hobson . . . Come with me."

He left his office and went with her down a long passage which led into a big white room with french windows overlooking the courtyard of the mission-house. It was a bare room with three or four rows of hard wooden benches, like a schoolroom, and was used by the White Missionaries as a chapel. At the far end was a long oak chest, upon which stood two candlesticks and an ivory crucifix.

Father Bonvallet lit the candles. He took from the altar an old and battered prayer-book, with a frayed binding. Magali was kneeling down in one of the pews. Father Bonvallet followed her example. He placed the prayer-book on the arm rest between them, and fluttered the leaves gently. Magali, her heart stifled with emotion, her eyes veiled with tears, infected more and more by the calm austerity of the setting, followed the missionary's hand as it passed over the text. Their voices harmonized in the recital of the prayer.

Suddenly Magali felt herself very close to Claudette. In mingling her new-found rapture with the robust faith of this good man, she felt that Claudette had forgiven her. Outside, the night was calm. No enemy plane disturbed the peace of Chung-king. The trees in the courtyard rustled in the east wind. Silence reigned over the sleeping mission-house.

No sound was heard save the whisperings of a man and woman kneeling side by side in prayer. They were praying earnestly. They were praying for the soul of a young girl who had died at the age of twenty.

THE END

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